



Bina Barua's
Jivanar Batat

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along
the
high
road

Translation
Lalit Kumar Barua

Asam Sahitya Sabha



Lalit Kumar Barua (b 1938) is a well-known Assamese critic and scholar. A former member of the Indian Administrative Service, he studied in Gauhati University and Delhi University.

Barua has authored eight books including three in Assamese on literary criticism and social history. He has also contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature* (1989), published by Sahitya Akademi and *Comparative Indian Literature* (1986), edited by Dr. K M George and published by Macmillan. His other important work *Oral Tradition and Folk Heritage of North-East India* (1999) contains, in an expanded form, the lectures first delivered at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, as a Visiting Scholar. He was awarded a Senior Fellowship of the Department of Culture, Government of India, for two years in 1997. He became a Fellow at the IIAS in July, 2000, and worked there in that capacity for three years.

Two comments on Lalit Kumar Barua's *Studies in Literature and Society*:

"Reading these essays of Lalit Kumar Barua was a rewarding experience and I am sure others of my temperament and taste will have the same experience. The book has come out of wide reading, mature judgement and sensitive evaluation of a scholar-critic deeply interested in India's past and future, especially in the realm of culture and philosophy."

[Dr K M George, Chief Editor, Classics of Indian Literature (Three Volumes), National Book Trust of India, August 31, 1993]

"It is an excellent introduction to modern Indian thought..."
(Robert K Boggs, Consul General, USA, May 27, 1994)

Comment on Lalit Kumar Barua's *Oral Tradition and Folk Heritage of North-East India*, 1999 :

"Documenting the connections in the folklore of these different people, he gives us an elaborate and meticulous account of the different versions of the same basic myth, ritual or folktale. His description of 'the origin myth' popular amongst the Gallongs and the Adis is a case in point. The chapter on tribal poetry in the North-East succeeds in detailing the evolution of poetry as distinct from the storytelling traditions of the ballad. Barua argues that tribal poetry is marked by both spontaneity and a sense of craft. Divested of the mythological or the narrative element of folklore, this poetry appeals to our basic human emotions in a startlingly direct manner."

Indian Review of Books (July-August, 2000)

Lalit Kumar Barua's latest work, *Education and Culture in North-East India : 1826-2000*, has been published by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, in 2006.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF
BINA BARUA'S
JIVANAR BATAT

ALONG THE HIGH ROAD

TRANSLATION
LALIT KUMAR BARUA

PUBLISHED BY



ASAM SAHITYA SABHA

A FEW WORDS FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY

ASSAM SAHITYA SABHA

There is no denying the fact that Bina Barua's *Jivanar Batat* happens to be unmatched literary creation and one of the most outstanding, most widely read, critically acclaimed Assamese novels. Therefore, publishing of the English translation of *Jivanar Batat* by Lalit Kumar Barua was a long-cherished dream of Asam Sahitya Sabha. This project was taken up some three years' back with the initiative of Dr Paramananda Rajbongshi, the then General Secretary of Asam Sahitya Sabha. But owing to some unavoidable circumstances, it took so long to complete the project. It is indeed a matter of great pride for Asam Sahitya Sabha to present this *Along the High Road* to the greater fraternity of readers in India and abroad.

It is often heard that when the non-Assamese readers are eager to have a taste of the superior Assamese literature, there has been very few efforts of translation of such high quality literature in Assam. Asam Sahitya Sabha has taken this comment very seriously and has now come up with a series of translation projects. Last year, Sabha had brought out the Bengali translation of Dr Surjyakumar Bhuyan edited 'Tripura Buranji' which was published by the Deptt. of History and Antiquity, Govt. of Assam, way back in 1938. That book, titled 'Tripura Desher Katha' which was translated into Bengali by Dr Mukti Choudhury, has earned rave reviews and wide-ranging appreciation among the readers of Tripura, West Bengal and even Bangladesh.

Along the High Road is in Asam Sahitya Sabha's second significant step in this regard.

Like all immortal literary classics, *Jivanar Batat* too has

Along The High Road, the English translation of Bina Barua's *Jivanar Batat*, a novel first published in 1944 and has been accorded the status of a classic in Assamese literature.

Translated into English by Lalit Kumar Barua, edited by Chandan Sarmah and published by Prahlad Chandra Tasa for and on behalf of Asam Sahitya Sabha, Chandrakanta Handique Bhavan, Jorhat, Assam, India.

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earned an admired status in the heart of Assamese readers and it will continue to be so in the ages to come. We firmly believe that *Along the High Road* will pave the way for *Jivanar Batat* to enter the world of non-Assamese readers and will also earn their accolade and admiration.

Lalit Kumar Barua, former Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, deserves our heartfelt praise in high words for his immaculate pursuit. Besides wonderful translation of the book, Shri Barua has prepared the final text by supervising its composition in computer and has also given a critical introduction of the novel. We express our deep gratitude to him. We also offer our sincere thanks to Smti. Ranjita Barua, wife of Shri Lalit Kumar Barua, for her all help and cooperation in publishing this book.

We also offer our heartfelt thanks to the family members of the late Dr Birinchi Kumar Barua (the actual name of the writer of the original novel) for their kind cooperation in publishing this book.

With talented artist Manjit Rajkhowa's innovative cover design, *Along the High Road* is now all set to undertake the journey along various roads to the greater community of readers around the globe.

Asam Sahitya Sabha indeed feels privileged to publish this book.

Prahlad Chandra Tasa

Chandrakanta Handique Bhawan
Jorhat, Assam

PREFACE

For readers of my generation the very name *Jivanar Batat* rings a bell. It has a long and living association for well over six decades. While translating I have kept the original title, giving the English subtitle in a suggestive way, making it as resonant as one possibly can.

I am really grateful to Smt. Santi Chaya Baruah for giving me the privilege of translating and publishing this novel authored by her husband, Birinchi Kumar Barua, one of the great architects of modern Assamese literature.

I am obliged to Asam Sahitya Sabha, which true to its continuing commitment to the Assamese language and literature came forward to publish this classic for the first time in the English language. I would like to thank Asam Sahitya Sabha's President Prof. Imran Shah, Vice President Dr. Paramananda Rajbongshi and General Secretary Shri Prahlad Chandra Tasa for responding to the need for putting an acknowledged classic of Assamese literature across a larger reading public.

I would like to convey a special word of thanks to Asam Sahitya Sabha's Sachib Shri Chandan Sarmah for editing the book and also for coordinating in the matter of printing. My thanks to artist Manjit Rajkhowa who has designed the cover.

My wife Ranjita Barua's help has been quite invaluable.

Lalit Kumar Barua

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

As was to be expected the translation of this Assamese classic to English language presented insurmountable difficulties.

Even after years, the language of the novel remains fresh and evocative. No doubt, this is due to the author's uncanny grasp over the totality of Assamese life—and his capacity to reproduce the staple of its living expression with an amazing consistency. The tone and the tenor of speech indelibly etch a variety of characters ranging from the newly rich gentry to humble peasants, from court officials to opium addicts—to a large assembly of men and women who fill the canvas of the novel. The peasants speak a racy, idiomatic speech, the rural women use pithy proverbs and allusions, which nearly have no equivalents in English language. In undertaking this translation I have been trying to meet this challenge. As far as translating traditional verses, the typical association of metaphors in speech, the challenge is perhaps no less.

I am happy that this task has now been seen through opening the way for a wider audience to read the novel to partake of its surpassing depth of human interest.

Lalit Kumar Barua

INTRODUCTION

The development of the regional novel and its multi-dimensional connection with social history can be seen in the difference between *Miri Jiyari* (1894) and *Jivanar Batat* (1944). It is significant that while about half-a-century separates these two major novels in Assamese literature, *Jivanar Batat* received belated recognition as a novel of crucial historical or cultural significance in more recent times. It is yet to be translated into a major Indian or foreign language though it has come to be regarded as a classic; a great Indian novel of the twentieth century. Its author Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-1964) wrote this novel under the assumed name of Bina Barua. Besides being an outstanding novelist he was a historian of Assamese culture and an eminent folklorist who did some important pioneering work on both ancient and the folk streams of Assam's history. It is not surprising that his most significant novel has often been regarded as being truly an authentic representative of Assamese life and culture.

This particular view of the representative character of *Jivanar Batat*, recorded a year after the novel was first published, has since been elaborated on by other important critics while evaluating the Assamese tradition of novel writing. It is not only because of the intervening period but also for other preoccupations of the novelist that this novel is very different from *Miri Jiyari* or any other subsequent novels both in terms of its thematic depth and narrative expansiveness. Despite its strong regional overtones with the evocative presentation of local ambience and idiom, the novel has a Hardy-like engagement with historical and social realities in the context of an agrarian society deeply attached to the traditional mores of religion.

Significantly, the main character in the novel is Tagar, a woman of purer intent and deeper sensitivity than any other person in the novel. Yet the character is not idealized and from the very beginning it represents the strong socio-religious context of the novel set in the heart of the Assamese countryside. The text weaves a rich tapestry of rural life, with tradition, culture and ecology interwoven into it, interpenetrated at times by the deeper layers of religiosity derived from the influences of neo-Vaisnavism in the social ethos of an organic community. All these combine to provide the backdrop of a human drama working out through the linear flow of the narrative.

Tagar inherits the best of rural refinement and religious culture of a traditional household in an upper Assamese village. Her father Bapuram Bora is a landowning rural gentleman of moderate means, deeply devoted to the religious traditions of the countryside. Their neighbour, the Mauzadar is the most influential man in the locality. The two neighbours are in such good terms that the Mauzadar and his wife treat Tagar as if she is a dear member of the family. The novel opens with a situation of happy conviviality, occasioned by the wedding of the Mauzadar's daughter. The occasion brings Kamalakanta, a young man known to the bride's elder brother, to the Mauzadar's house where he meets Tagar. Kamalakanta instantly falls in love with Tagar and a day before his departure, he opens out his heart to her and, in an impulsive moment, puts his ring on her finger declaring his resolve to marry her. Tagar's initial reaction was one of disbelief, if not outrage—her entire upbringing and disposition have been in the conservative mould of religious teaching. Yet out of respect for an educated young man, Tagar, deeply sad but trusting, consents and becomes betrothed. In due course the two families also give their consent. Kamalakanta, a brilliant student stands first in his graduation examination and

it is agreed that their wedding will take place once he gains employment, preferably in the civil service. Kamalakanta's father Mahikanta, a clerk in the collectorate aims high and succeeds finally in cornering the prized post of a Sub-Deputy Collector for his son through the good offices of Manik Hazarika, a Rai Bahadur, obviously very influential with the colonial Commissioner. But a price has to be paid. Rai Bahadur offers his eligible and accomplished daughter Suprova in marriage to Kamalakanta; Mahikanta writes a curt letter to Tagar's father breaking off the engagement. The sudden reversal of his daughter's fortunes makes Tagar's father momentarily distraught but he hardly gets sympathetic support from any quarter. In a desperate bid to ward off malicious gossip in the village about Tagar's association with Dharani, Bapuram Bora hurriedly marries her off to a faraway village without her consent.

Then Tagar, the innocent woman, embarks on a journey which changes every aspect of her life. From the day she is made to marry Dharani, the genial weaving instructor from Roha, a village miles away from her own, her fortunes turn irreversibly. Tagar begins a new life in another faraway village: taunted, ridiculed and constantly humiliated by not only her mother-in-law but also by other women of the village. Tagar, a woman of unsullied moral sensitivity takes over the mantle of a daughter-in-law in Dharani's household. Dharani becomes a bit aloof if not indifferent as he joins the Freedom Movement then fast spreading in the countryside. When Dharani is away from home, police looks for him and not finding him in the village takes his wife Tagar to the police station. The police officer humiliates her in every possible way but she stands the test with dignity. Having come to know of Tagar's detention in the police station, Dharani rushes in, pacifies an irate mob outraged by the behaviour of the policemen and surrenders himself. Soon, Dharani

is put behind bars like thousands of others who are participating in the Freedom Movement. Tagar, all alone, is left to fend for herself. Her little daughter Kamali is now her sole solace and support.

It is the aspect of womanly dignity that gives Tagar a strong sense of identity and makes her hold her own against adversity particularly in situations like the one at the police station when she is face to face with the demonic agencies of alien rule. But there is an underpinning of protest that soon reappears as she travels home along with her husband who now had plunged headlong into the Freedom Movement. Tagar could never forget that she was somehow saved from facing an ultimate humiliation due to arrival of Dharani in the police station, which the villagers too were about to attack. On their way home Dharani recapitulates the incident in his own way and offers a few consoling words. He explains to Tagar how service to the cause of the motherland makes one bear insult and oppression with equanimity. But this is how Tagar's reaction is described in the novel:

"Tagar did not say a word. Like the sky heavy with storm clouds, she followed Dharani, looking grave and lifeless. Even after hearing the strain of patriotism in her husband's voice her heart was washed silently by a sense of mortification at the indignities she has suffered."

Tagar remembers at that point how the police inspector's "greedy look swallowed her from head to feet" and how he threatened to crush her under his feet for all her defiance. It tortured her to recall how, at a certain point of the interrogation, she had almost fainted and, holding her daughter's hand, slumped to the ground.

That an anti-government volunteer and that too a woman should show such delicacy of self-respect was plainly beyond the police inspector. In that encounter he was grossly intolerant

to a defenseless woman. But there was a quick shift in his tone as the crowd became restive and Dharani appeared on the scene. But vengeance was burning inside him and later as the tragic denouement unfolds in the novel, he unhesitatingly arraigned the innocent woman on a false charge and humiliated her by raiding her house on a false pretext.

With Dharani in jail, Tagar leads a forlorn existence and as old memories crowd in, she lives face to face both in her conscious and unconscious mind with the happenings of the past. She often thinks of her father's cruelty in judging her harshly and without reason. She sheds tears or tries to forget her past or runs away from the "golden moment in her life which now appears to be grand and alluring like the dome of a temple seen from a distance."

Dharani returns from jail terminally ill from tuberculosis. Tagar nurses him back to recovery and, only for a brief interlude, Dharani is a loving husband. However, their life remains unfulfilled in more ways than one. Tagar's past too stands between her ailing husband and her happiness. An uneasy feeling returns at times when her ailing husband is beside her.

Notwithstanding what she has been doing all through, Tagar could never take possession of her husband as much or in the way she would have liked. Every time she wanted to enter the inmost core of her husband's heart through her love, something, inside her seemed to stand in the way, offering resistance. It is a hint of something, a memory not yet dimmed that would prevent her from doing so. It came in the form of a commotion in her heart.

From the day Dharani had been out of jail, Tagar had been trying to give her love in abundance. In doing so, she is always earnest, fully realizing that this was what scriptures required of a married woman. Finally, Dharani succumbs to his illness in

spite of Tagar's devoted nursing and the treatment provided by a kind doctor who is deeply attached to Tagar's little daughter Kamali. Tagar, now in need of a livelihood, joins a weavers' guild started by the benevolent doctor for the benefit of the poor widows in the village. The lonely doctor, a widower himself gives some time to the guild, finds happiness in helping the distressed women and finds companionship and joy in the company of Dharani's daughter. This gives grist to the village gossip mill and provides the police inspector an opportunity to settle old scores with Dharani's wife and the genial doctor.

In an ironic twist to the novel, Kamalakanta appears in the novel as the newly posted local revenue official. His wife Suprova, not knowing who Tagar is, calls the latter to teach her a few weaving designs and Tagar keeps visiting her for that errand for sometime. Meanwhile, there is a theft in Kamalakanta's house. The needle of suspicion points to Tagar for none else apparently had much access to his house. The police inspector points the accusing finger at Tagar and the police raid her house. An old ring, with Kamalakanta's name embossed on it, is recovered inside a box, which bears the name of the doctor. As the police inspector brings the ring before Kamalakanta, the latter discovers that the ring is the same one that he had put in Tagar's finger many years ago. Kamalakanta looks at the ring at first complacently, then in a state of consternation and finally in horror. He sees in it Tagar's innocence, his own past with himself mirrored in it and he falls into a trance.

The novel ends here. The narrative is so authentically detailed that by common consent the novel has been regarded by far as the greatest Assamese novel. While the older critics failed to grasp its essence the more sensitive among the modern critics following the Leavision mode of criticism have tried to show that the main focus of the narrative brings out a moral

vision which imposes a pattern in the novel. A contemporary reader will perhaps read more into the novel in terms of its particularity as well as its multi-dimensionality as a cultural text.

While discussing the genre of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin has identified two important characteristics, which are: the spirit of the process and the inconclusiveness. This interprets the novel as open-ended and better qualified to represent reality deeply. It has also the potential of representing a plurality or a multitude of voices other than the author's or the reader's own. The novel according to this view has an organic rather than abstract logic. A distinction has to be made between the 'novelistic voice' and the real voice, which often speaks through a different language.

One can note in this particular novel the folklore motif and the language with which the narrative begins. Or, one can note that even at particular dramatic points, it speaks through silence. In the narrative, the folk song or the subtle resonance of it obliquely presages or anticipates the fate of a young woman situated in a rural society that was ridden with patriarchy connected to the positioning of power and privileges. (1) One can recall here Tagar's thoughts in the novel:

"Tagar would remember her father's cruel treatment to her; and all alone, she would shed tears. Knowing fully well her character, her ideals, her father had disbelieved her most cruelly. He had fixed her marriage overnight ignoring her inner suffering and without making an effort to get at the truth, just because he wanted to retain his position and prestige in society. For the sake of his own good name and being frightened of gossip and rumour he had sacrificed his paternal love for the child. With a sense of pain Tagar would try to delete from her mind her father's image."

Tagar' stoic silence at several points when she is undeservedly charged by her mother-in-law or accused by the

police or on her long trudge back home from the police' station after her acute embarrassment and humiliation is more eloquent than words. It will have needed a different socio-religious context in the novel for the silence to be articulated. The following observation has relevance here although it speaks of a different context:

"...resistance is determined by positionality and that the factors of race, class and gender affect the form resistance takes in language. Resistance is not always voiced in authoritative or public ways; what is crucial to a feminist dialogic is the idea that resistance can begin as private when women negotiate, manipulate and often subvert systems of domination they encounter. Both public and private discourses are means of cultural resistance and intervention—speech is not always a sign of power or silence a sign of weakness. Rather, the contexts of silence and speech determine gendered relations." (2)

It is significant that Tagar's character is woven more around silence in a novel which is full of chatter, talks and dialogue or chorus-like commentary of a motley crowd. Despite the fact that it was written in the late thirties of the last century, the novel has sustained a realism in which men and women drawn from the common grooves of village life play their roles as they do in real life. Yet, the novelist leaves a good deal for the reader to imagine at the key points of the drama of Tagar's life and indeed possibilities of a wider response to the situation have not been foreclosed.

Older critics, in focusing more attention on the external elements of the plot like the recovery of a signet ring at the end, somewhat in the manner of a medieval romance missed this significance. These critics have regarded the denouement as a kind of device adopted by the writer. But, in the ultimate analysis

the depth and intensity of the novel could be read more meaningfully in the tale of a woman, caught in -the web of a particular social and historical context of a transitional society. It is also necessary to understand the full import of the novel through its language with the images and symbols embedded in it. The language thus has the sharpness and precision fit to portray the essence of the folk refrain and the complexity of the theme.

The significance of the novel in terms of certain specificities of life or culture or habitat genuinely reflective of an Assamese identity can be seen in bold relief if the novel is compared to the other outstanding novels of Indian tradition like Bankim Chandra's *Visavriksha* (1873), Tagore's *Gora* (1910), Sarat Chandra's *Pather Daabi* (1926) and Bibhutibhusan's *Pather Panchali* (1929).

Lalit Kumar Barua

- (1) The inner meaning of the opening lines of a folk song points significantly to a girl's plea to her father not to send her in a marriage to a place far away against her wish. This is actually something that happens in the story.
- (2) Diana Price Herndt in *The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic in Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic*. The University of New York, 1991, p-3

ALONG THE HIGH ROAD

CHAPTER - I

*The beak of a Moorhen is red
A long vermillion mark on it:*

*Dear Father,
Do not send me afar !*

ONE

Morongi was quite a famous place during the days of Ahom rule. During the reign of King Suhungmung, a fort was constructed around Morongi to stop the marauding Nagas and Kacharis and protect the Ahom Kingdom. Morongi's sky was filled with a kind of victory chant as soldiers and generals moved about on quick feet in the vicinity. But Morongi of today is 'shorn of all past glory'. There lay scattered only the bricks, made of yolk, remnants of an old kiln and some intricately sculpted pieces like the threshold or the door frame. In the clusters of villages that are included in a mauza like Soktoli, Joktoli, one would find, a few old Gohain families of Morongi still living. In those old says, Morongi village, included in the then Morongi mauza, was the proud habitat of many a Gohain-Phukan, Bora-Barooah, Saikia-Hazarika families living their lives in opulence. There are still a few of these old families at Morongi bearing their old aristocratic lineage. During the times of Purandar Singha, the last Ahom King, Ghinai Saikia of the Saikia clan, one of their early ancestors secured the authority to collect land revenue in that area. It is through this connection another Saikia was given the right to enjoy the good fortune of being the collector and supervisor of land revenue collection during the British period.

The family of Saikia, the Mauzadar of Morongi, is well known all over the Golaghat Sub-division. There is hardly any household, which did not receive a share of their bounty, sometime or the other. They never caused any harassment to the poor farmers while collecting the revenue nor exploited them by not entering the payment in the register and later filing suit against them to attach properties on the ground of non-payment of dues. The Mauzadar has always been celebrating the Bihu festival or Holi, the spring time festival of colours or taking part in other festivities together with the villagers. High and low, the rich and the poor in the village participate in these festivities all together in equal measure.

Bhagadatta, the present Mauzadar has been following the good example set by his forefathers. He has a straight heart, well disposed towards all – one, who loves to go along with the public on all occasions. Only seven days are left for the wedding of his eldest daughter, Aaideo. From today onwards, the house is crowded with a lot of activities. Men are working round the clock to build up spacious sheds to provide accommodation to the guests both in the backyard as well as in front of the house. Essential items are being supplied: the store keeper is busy in keeping them in the stores. The villagers have divided among themselves all the work, big or small, right from stitching the banana leaves to provide for improvised dishes to the collecting of good variety of soft rice and curd required for the occasion.

In the village, an occasion of wedding in a big family always turns out to be some kind of a festival. Moreover, this wedding takes place in the family after a long time. The youth in the village, the children and the young daughters and the daughters-in-law of the village are really expecting a surfeit of delight on this occasion. The boys are considering what will be the play they are going to stage on the occasion of the *joron*, the customary

wedding eve celebration held two days preceding the wedding day. They want to enact a play on Abhimanyu's death or on the death of Ravana – there will be battle scenes in these plays giving scope to the actors to come to the stage with bows and mace; the older group is dithering, they have reservations about the propriety of staging such a play. Is it an occasion for exhibiting the fighting scenes on the stage? They would rather like to have an enactment of a play, more befitting like the *sayambara* of Sita or the marriage of Rukmini. Madan Bayan's son is already working on the lines of dialogue of these two plays. The youngest son of Goda Bapu is already rehearsing on the Krishna dance.

Girls, who are all Aaideo's friends are gathering in a room to arrange the betel leaves, are having an animated discussion. There is a lot of enjoyment, singing, anecdotes and gossip which make their group so lively. It is as if all the joys of the world have found a way to their conversation. Tagar, daughter of Bapuram Bora, who is Mauzadar's next door neighbour is stitching the betel leaves with a thin bamboo needle and singing a few lines of a verse, very familiar to them all:

"Lord Krishna is my husband

My life will be fulfilled

There is no one more fortunate than I."

Before Tagar could finish, Numali looked towards her companions smiling meaningfully: "Listen, Aaideo is being married now but how is it that Tagar is counting herself so fortunate?"

Aaideo spoke gently:

"Tagar is counting on her fingers the days – when she will get married."

Tagar replied instantly: "I am counting days, yes But what about your own condition?"

"The lady faints once too often, her breathing is restless, tears moisten the eyes." She teased reciting the verse again.

She could not continue. Aaideo got up and almost gagged her mouth. As the small blades for cutting betel leaves in their hands fell apart, the girls laughed hilariously. Before the laughter could subside, Rangili Bai entered the room.

"Oh! These girls can laugh so much! If you are all together, where is the need for drums to provide accompaniment to the wedding."

Drawing her chador a bit upward and arranging the smooth end of her hairs Phuleswari, still laughing, said:

"Why are you so jealous, Bai? We laugh as long as we are girls don't you see, Aaideo from the very day her marriage was fixed has been crying?"

Rangili Bai shook her head and said:

"Why? What is there to cry about?"

With a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, Phuleswari said : "Aaideo wants to stay at home. She would not get married."

Rangili Bai looked somewhat sternly towards Aaideo, her wrinkled face giving out a gesture of sarcasm, almost of revulsion. Twisting her face in a peculiar manner, she said, "Do not tell me about the young girls' affection for their parents. You are all bees in the beehive. The day after your wedding, you will cry; touching the threshold of the house you would not like to step out to go to the house of your husband. You will curse your parents for sending you out in marriage. But the moment, you are in your husband's house, you will forget your parents and everything."

Not the words, but Rangili's gestures made them all laugh. To irritate her, Numali said : "Of course, Bai, Tagar does not like to marry."

"But suppose she likes to, where is the man, my dear?"

"My parents are not looking for a bridegroom, where do I get someone to match," she sang an old song.

"What do you say, Bai? Along with Aaideo's elder brother, is not his college friend coming? We will arrange her marriage with him... under the same roof itself. Before Numali could finish, Tagar caught her hair and dragged her and said:

"She wants to wash the ugly face with milk. The cat with broken ribs wants to climb to the top, listen to me, do not ask for the moon your legs will break but you will never have it."

Having been reminded of this folk saying, Tagar was about to cry. Seeing that things have taken a different turn, Phuleswari said, "Bai are you going to invite the guests just now?"

Taking out a betelnut piece from the tray, she gave a jerk while saying, "Yes, I am going right now. If I do not start now, there will not be time enough. The whole place is full of their relatives, don't you see ?"

"All right, Bai. Then take the betelnuts already cut. We will cut some more after our lunch."

Looking at the cut pieces of betelnuts, Rangili said, "How many, do you think? Will this suffice? Are you not required to invite the menfolk and the womenfolk separately in every household? In Hazarika's daughter's wedding, quite a row was kicked up over this – don't you remember?"

Looking for a betel leaf to take along with the betelnut piece already in her mouth, Rangili had a look at the betel leaves stitched in pairs with a thin bamboo needle and shouted, "Look, look they are putting four betel leaves together in one bundle. These useless girls! Does anybody put betel leaves in pairs? Either you make three or five."

The girls looked at each other, threw the betel leaves on the floor, and started weaving them together in pairs of three in each group with a bamboo pin.

"Tagar, go to mother and bring a piece of cloth to cover the tray with. I am going to ask Kalia to take the articles." Chewing a mouthful of betelnut, Rangili went out.

TWO

Krishnadatta, Mauzadar's eldest son, is studying B.A. in a Guwahati college. Kamalakanta is his very close friend. Both are in fourth year and are room mates in the hostel. Kamalakanta is keen to attend the wedding ceremony of Krishnadatta's sister; books and examinations make the college days quite unbearable. Like fishes coming out to breathe the fresh air occasionally, college students like to avail of holidays to enjoy a little bit of freedom.

Both friends are expected to reach Furkating station from Guwahati by the night train. Mauzadar has sent the bullock cart to bring the two of them in time. His wife has provided the meals for dinner which they could have on the way.

At Furkating itself, both of them had their meals and spread the bed sheets and the blankets on the cart to sleep on. It was very comforting to sleep under the warm quilt and the blanket as it was a cold January night. Once the bullocks were yoked, the cart began to move fast. The bullocks were of a good breed, brought from Manipur. The driver began to doze off soon allowing the bullocks to find their way as they were quite familiar with the track. But he kept on shouting instructions from time to time as a matter of habit. That was to convince others that he was in full control of the cart and the bullocks.

It was about to be dawn. Both friends woke up and decided that once they reached the village, they would walk across. Krishnadatta, removing the warm cover peeped out to see a haze of mist covering everything. There was no way one could recognize the leaves or the trees, the fields or the groves of forest. The cart driver was sound asleep and did not stir even when he was mildly pushed. Krishnadatta put his head inside the cover of the quilt feeling its cozy warmth.

Soon the morning crows started to make their shrill noise atop the banyan tree. Early morning birds started chirping on the branches of the trees. Kamalakanta looked outside and saw the mist gradually dissolving like smoke. The tall betel nut trees, the big bamboo groves standing like a flag were appearing in the distance. Delighted that they were about to reach the village, both of them got up hurriedly to put their shoes on and soon they got off the cart to walk on the road.

On both sides, the edges of the paddy fields merged in a hazy outline like that of a smoky screen. The fields were bereft of crop – the harvest was over by then, the hays covered the new dark and naked bosom of the fields as if about to wither away and die. Entwined in the hay were pulse seeds which were sprouting out bravely. In the distance were to be seen the haystacks which were to be burnt afterwards in a bonfire. Stacks of dry stalks of sugarcane were lying in a heap near the sugarcane fields. The air was moist with the smell of fresh molasses, newly made in the oven. In the bare silk cotton tree standing on the road, one could see a bird of prey appearing all of a sudden and disturbing the humble peace of the rural landscape. On all sides, there are signs of fulfillment, the leisurely grace of a winter in January.

From near the fields, as one takes the road to the village, there stood the cottage of Nabadeep the cobbler who was living

there for nearly two generations. His grandfather and his father had died on that very spot. Nabadeep, though not a member of the village community was yet an inseparable part of it. Right from tanning the hides for making drums to the removing of the carcasses from the village, for things good as well as bad, he was quite indispensable. Awake already, Nabadeep and his daughter were warming themselves up by the fire lit in the courtyard. His wife was washing the utensils with ashes nearby. Having found someone to converse with so early on, he turned his attention to the visitors and seeing the Mauzadar's son, saluted him. The dog, ashes all over its body, made a long "wooh.... wooh" sound and twisted his tail and barked seeing a stranger. Nabadeep threw a stone in the direction of the dog to silence him but the dog went back to his place with a slight groan, twisting his tail in between his legs.

There were rows of thatched cottages on both sides of the road. Rarely did one come across a house with a tin roof. Almost every front yard had trees and shrubs, some useful and essential, others not so. Someone has his house just by the side of the road; for some other house, one has to go by a small bridle path beside a bamboo grove. The village folk were then busy performing household chores in their houses. Someone was taking the cows out and tying them to a post by the road and spreading the hay before them to provide the meal of the morning to the bovine. A few women who came to throw cowdung of the cowsheds out of the courtyard drew a veil to cover their faces and as soon as they saw the strangers on the road they quietly stood aside.

The daughters and daughters-in-law of the village gathered round the municipal well to fetch water. A middle-aged woman was seen bathing in the open by pouring buckets of cold water on herself and rinsing the wet clothes on her body. She cast her

head down in embarrassment when she saw two young men on the road. Other women taking water from the well looked on with curiosity. They exchanged quick glances and could come to the rough conclusion about the identity of Kamalakanta, as the friend of Krishnadatta, the son of the Mauzadar in a moment.

Hari bapu was just throwing the shutters of his grocery shop open. His was the only shop in the village that dealt in salt, edible oil and cereals. Krishnadatta has been seeing this shop since his early boyhood. He could point out without verifying the different stacks keeping salt, cereals, tea or the two tins of Kerosene in the shop. Like everything in the village retaining the old touch, Bapu's grocery shop failed to change along with the times. It is the same house, the same old items and the same price. The fat bananas three to a paise and the coconuts kept in pairs hanging by a rope in the front open space, as it was in the old days. Even today, villagers sit on the bamboo bench kept in the courtyard and indulge in gossip; some of them smoke tobacco or the more intoxicating *bhang* while sitting there.

Krishnadatta recognized the men who were sitting covering their heads and ears with warm shawls and smoking at the same old place. There was Mahendra, his boyhood friend. Mahendra had the habit of going fox hunting in those days. Krishnadatta often kept company with him as he went looking for fox holes in the field. On a moonlit night, he recalled their going to bring honey from a beehive on a fig tree, a quarrel ensuing there between them and their indulging in fighting with each other.

Mahendra looked up to Krishnadatta but was not sure if he should address him in the old familiar terms. He could finally bring himself to speak, in a very impersonal tone, to him saying briefly, "To the wedding?" Krishnadatta nodded implying 'yes' for an answer, and moved on. His college education, he felt, had made him behave with artificiality with someone with whom he

had shared the happy years of his childhood: the thought made him a bit depressed.

Before Krishnadatta and his friend reached the premises of the house, an enthusiastic reception for them was ready. His brother and sisters went about shouting 'brother has come, brother has come' and came out to the porch of the house. Some villagers who were working in the backyard came out even with pick and shovel or whatever they were working with at the time, just to see the eldest son of the family. Tagar, Numali and Sonpahi, the girls cutting the betelnuts inside the house came out to welcome them. Aaideo was delighted as her dear elder brother arrived. But this time she was a bit shy and hesitant to come out as freely as she used to on similar occasions in the past. Aaideo did not come out at all.

Mauzadar was eagerly waiting for the son's arrival and was pacing up and down the porch of the house. He started by addressing Kamalakanta in familiar terms and with ease without being introduced to him by his son. "Did the bullock cart reach the station in time", "where did they leave the cart behind" – one question following the other in quick succession removed any sense of diffidence that Kamalakanta might have been entertaining in his mind.

The wife of the Mauzadar was working in the kitchen at the time. As soon as she was told of her son's arrival, she put the *chador* over her head to cover it partly and came out to meet them. When she found Mauzadar talking rapidly to Kamalakanta, she was peeved. "What are you doing? The boy must be tired after the long journey and instead of calling him in, you have started talking".

"Look here, I am the one, who gets the blame. The boy could hardly lift his eyes, he feels so shy before you."

"Come on, my son. You are also my son. What is there to feel shy before your mother?"

The simple words of welcome coming straight from the heart was nothing but an expression of motherly feeling and a sense of pride in having this natural affection. Moved by all this, Kamalakanta bent and touched the feet of the wife of the Mauzadar showing his deep respect for her.

"All right, my son. You are not required to do this." Saying this, Mauzadar's wife asked Kamalakanta to step inside. Like a snake under the spell cast by a snake charmer Kamalakanta followed her into the house.

THREE

Mauzadar has divided the tasks to be performed on the marriage day among all quite neatly. A batch of workers will attend to providing refreshment to the guests, another group will be in charge of the stores and so on. Kamalakanta is to look after the guests coming from the town, specially those who accompany the bridegroom at night, offer betelnuts and receive them. It is not easy to satisfy the town folk when they come to attend any marriage in the village : it is the same with those who accompany the bridegroom to the bride's house. Both groups think that their presence inflates the importance of the occasion. Gentlemen who come with the bridegroom tend to find fault with the arrangement for their reception and more often than not, make fun of it. Like the new bride in the father-in-law's house, the relatives on the bride's side have to be very careful not to cause any displeasure or wound the susceptibilities of these gentlemen.

The auspicious time having been determined to be around midnight, the bridegroom is about to arrive. The sound of drums could be heard some distance away. Womenfolk sitting inside are quite restive. The bride – her last ceremonial bathing just over – is putting on the bridal dress helped by her friends, the choicest ornaments are now displayed on her person. With

everyone waiting in expectation, the bridegroom finally arrives on the porch. The women singing marriage songs surge forward and everyone gets ready for the performing of the traditional ritual of welcoming the bridegroom.

His feet washed with cleansing water as part of the traditional welcoming the bridegroom is made to sit briefly on a raised platform near the place where the main ritual is going to be performed. Gentlemen accompanying the bridegroom are also sitting there. Kamalakanta is solicitously offering betelnuts and cigarettes etc. to the guests; Kamalakanta is made the butt of their ridicule because of his dress and haircut which are set according to the current fashion prevailing among college going boys. They stretched their hands, all at a time, towards him requesting for betelnuts or cigarettes making it difficult for Kamalakanta to oblige all as much as he would have liked to do so. One of them, craning his neck in Kamalakanta's direction says with mock seriousness: "Should we be deprived because we have not been to college" and when Kamalakanta flushed with embarrassment goes up to offer him betelnut, another in the group shouts: "Please throw a piece to our side. Need not fear that the Mauzadar's stock will be exhausted." As Kamalakanta passed by, two of them commented: "Is this gentlemen meant for the youngest one of the Mauzadar ?" "Otherwise why is he slogging hard like a day labourer," added another and looked towards Kamalakanta. Kamalakanta did his best to ignore these comments and went inside.

Betelnuts offered to the guests in a marriage party are never enough. People who don't take betelnuts normally nor smoke indulge in these habits when they come to attend a marriage. Kamalakanta had to rush inside many times to get more of it from the stores inside. A social occasion as much as a common adversity often brings people together. The barrier that

separates is easily removed amidst the joy and laughter marking such an occasion. Kamalakanta has become quite close to everyone in the house within just two days, so much so that all his initial hesitation and diffidence vanished in no time.

Inside the house the girls are busy cutting the betelnut into pieces and sharing pleasantries, thoroughly enjoying themselves. Kamalakanta has been there a number of times to bring the betelnut for offering to the guests. This time when he rushed inside, betelnut tray in hand, a girl coming from the opposite side dashed against him and fell down on the floor all of a sudden. The tray flew off his hand, making a clanging sound, which other girls heard. Some of them brought out a hurricane lamp for it was quite dark : they came out quickly to find that it was Tagar lying on the floor and rubbing her forehead in great distress. Kamalakanta almost shrunk in painful embarrassment, was standing by silently. Imagining the whole scene to themselves, the girls laughed uproariously. Last few days, they had been teasing Tagar all the time, pairing her with Kamalakanta, and seeing Kamalakanta and Tagar now face-to-face in that situation, they could not resist their laughter. Malati came near her and asked, "Did it hurt too much, Tagar, dear?"

Taking her hand away from her forehead and quite irritated, Tagar pushed Malati away and said, "Go, I do not need your sympathy now."

"Let us all go. She is only pretending to be hurt. When we all were sitting there what was it that brought her here?" Hearing Numali's words, all of them laughed mischievously. Kamalakanta's face now turned crimson. He stood motionless for quite sometime. Malati came near, clasping Tagar in an affectionate embrace and said again.

"Do come up. It is time to make the bride ready. Do you mean to stay here like this?"

Tagar covered her eyes and cried, saying "You, please go. I am not going with you."

Numali pulled Malati to the door and said, "What are you thinking? Do you expect Tagar to come with you? Why should she crave our company now?" She then looked to the other girls. As Tagar tried to lift herself up, they smiled as if they had come to know of some mystery and quickly, like ripples of laughter, they vanished from the scene.

Everything happened in a flash : Kamalakanta could hardly realize it all. After the girl left, he had a problem in hand. It would seem quite strange that he should remain standing face-to-face with the young girl. The guests were also expecting betelnuts to be brought from inside. He hesitated to leave the girl there and go across. Her face too was rapidly changing colours as she was quite confused not knowing what to do.

As soon as the girls who were still casting long glances backward vanished from sight, Kamalakanta mastered some courage to speak to the girl, slowly coming forward :"Is it still bleeding?"

"Yes, On the forehead. There is wound near the eye."

Kamalakanta, apparently forgetting everything, took his handkerchief out and placed it on Tagar's forehead, saying : "You will feel comfort if I pour some cold water to your eyes."

Kamalakanta took her by the arm and helped her to stand up. There was no need for so much care on his part. But it is the gesture, which goes beyond mere formality that gives delight. Pleasure is derived when one gets more than what is due. As Kamalakanta held Tagar's arm, she made no motion of taking it away. In the first flush of youth, girls do like the faint touch of a young man but the society is usually too vigilant for one to take more liberties. After Tagar finally stood up, Kamalakanta moved

a few paces slowly like a bride unwilling to step out of her parental house. Tagar too did not drag herself away since she thought that it would not be fair as he was only showing his concern for her.

But in a moment, Tagar's instinct made her quite alert. She picked up the betelnuts that were on the floor and hurriedly went inside.

Having hesitated to enter the room alone with a girl, who is no relation of his, Kamalakanta stretched the hurricane lamp out and said : "There are cigarettes in the box on top of the rack. Please bring that too."

Like an intoxicating substance, the touch of a woman's body brings in a new kind of sensation to a young man. Coming in contact with Tagar, even though for a fleeting moment made Kamalakanta throb with delight : a lamp, as it were, has been lit inside him. With a smile testifying to his sense of pride and satisfaction, he entered the guests' enclosure with the betelnuts to offer to them.

FOUR

Those who came with the bridegroom were sitting in a cluster around the bridegroom near the centre where the main Vedic ritual was going to be performed. Bridegroom's friend and a few others were sitting near the bridegroom in order to show their closeness to him. Many in public gatherings tried to be near the presiding person for they think it would enhance their importance or influence. Many others considered it to be a good fortune if they could rub shoulders with high officials on public occasions. Similarly, friends of the bridegroom tried to establish their importance in the bride's house by getting as close to the bridegroom as they possibly could.

Priests from the two houses kept the required items near the centre, where the fire would be lit. The bridegroom's priest had misplaced his *ghee* container and was searching for it among other articles. It could have been left behind by mistake! Bridegroom's uncle who was sitting near taking due care of the bridegroom blurted out. "Did I not tell you to check on the things you were carrying?" Being slighted in front of the priest from the other side, the priest of the bridegroom retorted somewhat on a high pitch : "Am I to bring everything on my back?" To flatter the uncle and score a point over the other priest, the bride's priest said : "Sir, you have said the right thing. He ought to have

supervised the bringing of these sacred things. I take personal care whenever I have to go with a bridegroom." Making a thin thread out a straw for the ritual by one of his fingers, the oldest priest said sarcastically, "Leave it, leave it, how long your family has been in this occupation of priesthood? You are bragging too much. To err is human."

Thinking that a quarrel should not ensue now over a trifle, the Mauzadar sitting near the bridegroom said : "Well, priests, what do you gain by arguing over the *ghee*? No need to cry over split milk." Trying to end the dispute once for all, he smiled and said, "There is very good *ghee* made of cow's milk stored in our house, separately – is it not so? Since you are to take our girl, you should have no qualms about burning our *ghee*. Please see that the auspicious time is not passed. Please hurry up."

Being rescued from a difficult position, the priest of the bridegroom bared his toothless mouth and laughed raucously and said "Yes, yes sir, you are very correct. Can there be any impurity in *ghee*, honey and milk? Sir, you may please ask for some from inside. When you have a Bhattacharyya of Akrohi clan as a priest, there is not the least chance of the auspicious ceremony not being performed at the auspicious moment. Sir, you know Akrohis of Koliabor, I am sure?"

Mauzadar nodded to imply that he knew them. Satisfied, the priest smiled and said, "Why will you not know now them, sir? Are we from an ordinary Brahman family? Our family is still enjoying lands gifted long ago by the royalty at Nagaon." Turning the thin thread towards the bridegroom he said : "Boy, wear this now." Looking towards the priest he added: "You need not go on staring. Make your own arrangement." Bride's priest replied sarcastically: "We are ready. You need not worry about us." Turning the pages of the scripture and looking at the Mauzadar, he spoke making a gesture with his hand : "Please recite... come here... stay here... be near and ever present and so on."

News was sent indoors to bring out the bride. There was a hurrying and a scurrying inside for the last time. The girl was beside herself with crying. She could hardly raise her head. She had been fasting for the last three days. Fasting and grief made her very weak. The condition of the mother was worse. Being busy the whole day, and because of all the noises about, she could forget everything during day time but now, particularly after she was brought out for the ritual bathing of the bride for the last time, tears started to roll down her eyes and she was hardly able to see her way.

During the day, she fainted a number of times; Madhab's widowed grandmother had been constantly near her and taking care of her. Sometimes, oil was rubbed on her head to give her relief. On another occasion, curd of cow's milk was given to her. Madhab's widowed grandmother was in the habit of showering her affection on her neighbours liberally. Let there be any mishap or distress in any family, she would always be present showing her ready sympathy and affection. In front of her restraint and purity, the darkness of danger in any household seemed to vanish. Those who were deeply shaken by the loss of near and dear ones derived a new strength seeing her selfless concern and affection. When they came to experience the grief and sorrow of widowhood they found the strength to bear their own grief. It was not that in the Mauzadar's house, she was taking care of the mother of the bride only. She enquired from time to time if the children have had meals and once she called the Mauzadar inside to give him some curd. In the usual confusion of a house of wedding quite a few of their relatives missed timely meals : she was looking after them too. And she took all these tasks upon herself voluntarily.

Besides Madhab's grandmother, two or three other elderly ladies were consoling Mauzadar's wife from time to time. Touching her head softly one of them was saying : "Why are you grieving, my dear? Are you the only one to give a daughter in marriage? This is the way of the world." Another was saying: "It

is the parent's duty to bring up the girl and give her in marriage to a worthy husband. You brought up your daughter so long with all the care in the world; now is the time to send her out, cheerfully."

"Get up, dear, get up. Don't mar the occasion by crying. Seeing you cry, the girl will be heartbroken." Saying these words, a third one touched her face gently and consoled her.

Madhab's grandmother consoled: "Your eldest son-in-law is like your eldest son. Your family is now expanded. This should be a matter of happiness. You have a new relative to be of help to you in times of need. Did you not read what Daivaki had said to Sasiprova as mentioned in the holy book.

*The daughter, the son-in-law are yours
Yours is the house
You will be the dear one, we will be far
After so much goodness
Krishna is your son-in-law
In joyous spirit
You should celebrate.*

The consoling words of the gentle woman and her tranquil smile restored the mother's poise and she lifted her head, rearranging her dress, fully controlling herself. Seeing that the words of the scripture recited by the widow had a soothing effect, another woman added her bit saying "Yes, yes. Your son-in-law on the auspicious day of the wedding is none other than Lord Krishna himself. You are to pray for the welfare of the son-in-law and the daughter all the time."

Numali came there and informed that it was time to take the bride to the centre nearer the fire where the main ritual was to be performed. The mother was now helped by the girls to get up and get ready to go to her appointed place. Meanwhile, one of the younger relatives of the groom came inside with a betelnut tray to pay his customary respects to the bride before she was conducted outside for the main ceremony.

FIVE

The bridegroom hailed from Sivasagar. On the third day of the wedding, the bride was sent to her new home. Her elder brother accompanied her. Kamalakanta had to stay on till Krishnadatta returned. Kamalakanta had no objection to extending his stay. He was surrounded by so much of warmth and affection in Mauzadar's house, he was enjoying it immensely. He liked to hear address like 'brother', 'uncle' all around. His heart was full of gratitude, his mind was always cheerful. This was the dear land of his, the real loving Assam, where so much of affection was pouring out from every corner, from so many brothers and sisters all around.

Girls of neighbourhood used to come freely to meet him, to speak or to crack innocent jokes and exchange pleasantries. Tagar was at hand to bring anything that was needed by him. Their house was in the same neighbourhood – just beside the sprawling house of the Mauzadar. Tagar's father, Bapuram Bora lived on his income from agriculture. He was a prominent and leading man of the village. Mauzadar's wife was keeping Tagar in her house for a few days during the day time so that she might not feel her daughter's absence in the house.

Kamalakanta was reclining on his bed for an afternoon nap in the room adjacent to the sitting room. He was not asleep, but

he kept his eyes closed. Partly opening his eyes, he saw Tagar's stepping into the room silently. Kamalakanta pretended to be sleeping. Seeing Kamalakanta lying on bed with the warm shawl covering his body, Tagar came near the table. There was a glass of water and a few English books on the table. Tagar kept the articles on the wooden chair, took out the table cover, shook it before placing it again on the table top. She rearranged the books nicely in rows on the table and moved slowly towards the door. When she was about to open the door, Kamalakanta called her from behind : "Wait, Wait, where are you going?"

Tagar was caught unaware by the voice from behind and looked back; Kamalakanta was now sitting on the bed. When their eyes met, Tagar was very much embarrassed. Her eyes were downcast, so deeply embarrassed was she.

"Why did you want to go out so soon after coming in?"

"Aaita has gone out to our house. She had asked me to serve tea to you as soon as you wake up. When I saw you sleeping..." Tagar was too embarrassed to finish the sentence. Not being able to say anything, she kept on twisting the end of the *chador* she was wearing, showing her unease.

"Did Aaita tell you to put the table in shape?" Kamalakanta's smiling face turned towards Tagar. Tagar's face now turned crimson. "Let me bring tea for you," said Tagar and the very next moment, she was gone.

Kamalakanta placed his head once more on the pillow to sleep but in reality he was in a different mood with a deep sense of self-satisfaction. What he saw he liked so much-reality became a dream of desire by the exercise of imagination as soon as he closed his eyes; it became all the more precious. Man's imagination is, so to say, not as poor as that of a blind or miserly God.

After sometime Tagar entered the room with a cup of tea and bananas on a plate. Placing it on the table, Tagar, a shy smile on her face, said:

"You are sleeping again? Then I shall bring afterwards."

Kamalakanta removing the warm cover, now stood up quickly. Taking the glass of water from the table, he said:

"I caused you pain by inflicting a bleeding wound on your forehead on the wedding night. I do not want to inflict more pain today by forcing you to make tea twice."

"You are always bringing up that incident..." Tagar spoke only a half-sentence because of her embarrassment. Ringing the mouth with water, throwing the water out through the window, Kamalakanta rubbed his face with a towel and said:

"Incident.... That you asked me not to mention May be, one day, one day, that will make you remember me. Is it not so?" As he was about to sit, after finishing the sentence, Kamalakanta smiled looking towards Tagar.

Tagar outstretched the plate towards Kamalakanta; her elbow touched the corner of the table, shaking it slightly and a book fell on the floor; Tagar picked the book up quickly placing it on her forehead, for a moment before keeping it back on the table.

Kamalakanta noticed Tagar's simple attitude of reverence and said:

"But this is an English book."

"Does not Goddess Saraswati reside in an English book?"

"No."

"Is not English book also sacred as scripture?"

"How can it be?"

"No, You are only joking," Tagar looked downwards and said pleadingly.

Peeling off the banana, and taking a mouthful Kamalakanta asked:

"Do you believe in the scripture?"

"Good, God! Why should I not?" Tagar almost shook hearing the question.

Mauzadar's wife who heard the last sentence spoken by Tagar as she was about to get into Kamalakanta's room. As soon as she was in, she said: "Oh, I see! She has started an argument with you about the scripture".

Kamalakanta was embarrassed. Tagar too looked downward.

"Sit down, my son. I came to see if she had served the snacks. She tends to forget everything when she starts an argument." She looked toward Tagar with an affectionate smile. Tagar came out of the room quietly by the side thinking that there would be more praise in store for her.

"The girl is so accomplished. She can read the scripture very well. She secured a scholarship when she passed the primary. But she is sharp in her tongue."

Kamalakanta smiled faintly.

"Her father wanted to teach her English. We prevented it."

Sipping milk, Kamalakanta said:

"Thinking that she will lose her caste purity – isn't it?"

"No no, knowledge should not lead to loss of caste or anything like that. Point is what will a village girl do with English education? Are there not many things, one could learn, by reading in one's own language?" Kamalakanta's face did not show signs of protest but he did not have the courage to speak out his mind. Without a word, he kept on sipping his milk.

"Where is the gain by giving a girl too much of education? She should learn to manage the household perfectly. What do you say?"

Kamalakanta was almost forced in saying 'yes'.

"Tagar's mother is a bit worried now that Aaideo is married. She would like to arrange her marriage tomorrow itself, if she can. Because, of course, Tagar is younger by one-and-a-half-year."

Parents have the habit of concealing the age of their children in respect of others but Kamalakanta was pleasantly surprised to see that Mauzadar's wife was an exception. Thinking that he should not remain totally silent, Kamalakanta said:

"Why is the mother thinking of her marriage now?"

"Please do not take it otherwise, dear. If a marriageable daughter is in the house, there is no end to the worries of her parents. A young girl is like the flood in the summer. The quicker you can get rid of her, the better for all."

Kamalakanta laughed.

"Her mother has asked me to tell you to look for a suitable boy to marry Tagar. You both should look for a groom for her. There are quite a few in this neighbourhood but the mother wishes to give her in marriage to an educated boy even if he is from outside."

"All right," nodded Kamalakanta.

"A girl's luck can turn out to be as hollow as a pricked gourd. Who knows where she will land up finally? Yet, the parents wish differently. It is but natural."

"If Krishna tries, it will not be difficult to get an educated boy."

"I am telling you, also. Please keep in mind. Please stay on. I am going out. Tagar wants to go too. Let me send betel leaves to her mother with her." Placing the cup on the plate and taking it, Mauzadar's wife left the room.

Looking at the packet kept on the table he asked, "Is it a present for me?"

Tagar, shy and diffident, eyes downcast did not say a word. Opening the wrapper Kamalakanta saw what it contained. A beautiful tablecloth with a fine embroidery. When he opened it, he saw the pattern, a flower and two buds behind a lotus leaf. Leaf, flower and bud – the yarn in each of a different colour. The artist who worked on that design not only knew in reality what was put there but also had a fine sense of matching colours in an artistic combination. The surrounding creepers and the vine did express an inner feeling of the artist beautifully.

Kamalakanta folded it slowly and asked:

"Have you brought it here to show it to me?"

"Oh, why should I bring it to show it to anybody?"

"Would you really like to part with such a fine piece and give it to someone?"

"I would not have given, if I did not like to. When I worked on the design I thought of giving it to someone. Why should I take so much trouble if it was for me only?"

"I hope, I do not happen to be that someone."

"You may turn out to be him or you may not. Since you have received it, take it. I embroidered the flower for your sake." Having uttered these words, Tagar was perturbed thinking of the meaning, it could convey.

A powerful longing, half-understood or not understood at all, stirred Kamalakanta's heart. Like the reed flute tunefully playing to the touch of the wind, his heart brimmed over with an unknown delight. In that frame of mind Kamalakanta forgot all about fear and hesitation. He placed Tagar's hand on his and took off his ring and put it on Tagar's finger and it all happened, as if, in a flash. At first, Tagar could not grasp anything at all. But

SIX

Kamalakanta and his friend were to leave on the following day. After tea and snacks in the afternoon, both of them had gone out for a stroll. Kamalakanta returned before it was evening. Krishnadatta stayed back to visit his uncle's house. Kamalakanta took off his shirt placing it on a hanger and opened the suitcase kept near the bedstead for arranging the clothes. He kneeled down to look at the clothes more closely. Two new pieces were presents received on Aaideo's wedding. It was the usual practice to distribute a good number of presents among close relatives. Aaideo, at the time of leaving for the groom's place, touched Kamalakanta's feet and presented him a home woven towel with a fine floral design and a silk piece. Looking at the floral design Kamalakanta thought of the sweet relationship between a brother and sister and his heart had a thrill of joy.

At that moment, Tagar came there with a packet neatly wrapped up with paper. She thought that there was nobody in the room. As she was about to leave keeping the packet on the table, her hand came upon a chair nearby and made a sound. Kamalakanta closed the suitcase and looked up. Tagar, about to leave, had her gaze fixed on Kamalakanta. Poor girl! When she saw Kamalakanta, she stood back where she was. Placing the towel in the suitcase, Kamalakanta stood up and came forward.

she was reluctant to take the ring out once it was already in her finger. Trying to lighten it and give it a colouring of joy, Kamalakanta smiled and said : "This is all I have to offer in return."

Covering her eyes in embarrassment and weeping quietly, Tagar said : "Why have you brought ruin upon me?"

Kamalakanta felt ill at ease. Fear and apprehension shook him now. He asked eagerly: "Your ruin?"

"How will I show my face to people," Tagar asked, still weeping. The reply removed a stone pressing upon the breast, Kamalakanta said slowly, "I will see to that. If you so wish, you can return the ring."

"No, it would not be proper to return the ring. But please, tell me, why have you humiliated me like this?" She could not say anything more. Sorrow and resentment choked her and her heart was about to stop.

Drawing a long breath, Kamalakanta said:

"Love does not brook this consideration of insult or humiliation, will not wait for formalities; it has no day or night. Such a flood of love has suffused my being, for drowning my self in it, who knows I would have been kept waiting on the dry sands with futile hope for ever."

"Why have you done this without telling my father?" Tagar's feeling of grief shook Kamalakanta.

Kamalakanta realised deeply how he had wounded Tagar's sense of self-respect. When he found an ordinary girl having so keen a sense of self-respect he developed great respect for her. What he could have sought for by the front door with dignity, he wanted to have it stealthily by the backdoor bringing an unbearable burden of blame on his head. Why? He took Tagar's hand once more in his hand and pleaded with her – whatever

had happened, there was no point in ruing it now. Man has his weak moments in life – that is why he is still flesh and blood, not an ethereal creature like god. To commit a mistake is wrong, but in trying to rectify it, there is merit. Admission of mistake may bring punishment but there is no disgrace.

He waited for a while and then went on emotionally, "What wrong I have done secretly today, I will compensate. This incident today is not the expression of my mad youth, please believe me." He loosened his grip slowly on Tagar's hand. Almost unknowingly Tagar bent and touched Kamalakanta's feet and rushed out of the room. Tagar casting aside her youthful liveliness was transformed into a woman of serious countenance almost in an instant. Kamalakanta looked through the window to the darkness outside. The silence of the evening before him became eloquent.

SEVEN

Kamalakanta's father Mahikanta Baruah is a clerk in the office of the Deputy Commissioner's Court at Dibrugarh. Mahikanta's forefathers had to give up their age-old occupation as well as their place of residence along with the coming of the new dispensation of the British which changed the capital and the very face of the province. Like the stones of an old dilapidated temple finding their place underneath the granary floor, the titles conferred by the old Ahom Kings quite often began to be linked to the new families enhancing their social position in the process. It appeared that the surname 'Baruah' was the one most helpless of the whole lot since it was adopted by all and sundry irrespective of their social status; Kamalakanta's grandfather took this surname for the first time and thus cleared the way for the proud inheritors of their family heritage to achieve renown.

Padmakanta was a teacher in the primary school. He lived well with the salary of six rupees a month. The struggle to meet the ever-increasing—mostly self-created—needs was much less felt then. Padmakanta's son Mahikanta read upto Class VIII before taking up the job of a copyist in the Court. After sometime, he became permanent by keeping the Shirastadar happy through liberal supplies of sweet curd. Mahikanta was staying in a hut built on another's land in the town from the day he took up work

there. He visited his ancestral village often to fetch rice and also maintain his contacts with his relatives. But once he became permanent in his job, he settled down in a newly-constructed house with white walls and a tin roof in a better locality, in which most other government employees lived. Mahikanta was frugal in his habits. Since his wife too hailed from a village, no expenses were incurred over avoidable luxury items. Like his colleagues in the office, he had his extra bit of earning from the witnesses on both sides of the clients in the Court, and this was enough for him to see through the month. He lent out his salary of 50 rupees at a compound interest obviously keeping in mind that even his little earnings may be too much for his good.

Kamalakanta was also brought up in the same tradition of thrift. He knew well the plus and multiplication tables but not the minus or the division table, so to say. After securing a scholarship in his matriculation examination, he left for Guwahati to study in the college. He appeared in the B.A. Examination and was about to finish his college education. Mahikanta was quietly considering how he could manage a school teacher's job for Kamalakanta once he passed his B.A. examination.

B.A. results are just out and Kamalakanta secured first class in Philosophy. In no time, the news spread in the Court. The clerks and other employees rushed in to congratulate Mahikanta. Chandra, an advocate came to Mahikanta, for a particular case reference. It would normally not have been easy to get this reference from Mahikanta without paying him some amount. The shrewd advocate came near Mahikanta and said with a smile: "Baruah, you should not sit idle now. Ask Kamalakanta to try for the Civil Service. Hindus have not got a chance from our district for long. We are here to help, we will move strongly in the matter."

The advocate was the Secretary of the newly-established 'Sanatan Dharma Sabha'. Expecting some help in the future, Mahikanta noted the case number carefully and gave it to the advocate.

Paresh Kataki, who was dealing with a file on grazing reserves, lifted his spectacles, a very old frame, and asked Gajen Tamuli who was sitting in front.

"Yes, Gajen. What is honours in the B.A. Examination?"

Gajen Tamuli joined service only recently. He read upto I.A. In fact, he was the only person who could speak with some personal knowledge about college education. Elated by the question which he regarded as a compliment, Gajen Tamuli pressed the blotting paper on the draft of a letter to dry the ink and said: "One has to read one additional subject in honours. Just like having an additional subject in the Matriculation examination."

Paresh Kataki removed specks of dust from one corner of the eye with the end of the shawl he had on and nodded in agreement. Jeevan Bhuyan lifted his head to ask Gajen Tamuli out of curiosity, "What is first class, Tamuli?"

"First Division," Paresh Kataki said gravely and looked toward Gajen Tamuli for approval.

"Yes, one can say, First Division. There are four papers. One has to get 80%."

"Not a matter of joke to secure 80%. Baruah's son has passed with a lot of credit," said Jeevan Bhuyan.

Shaking his legs now spread out on the table Paresh Kataki said, "Yes, yes, it is not at all easy by any means to snatch the first position in the Calcutta University from the Bengali boys. Baruah's son is in fact a Jewel."

Revenue clerk Pitambar Bharali was scratching his ears and was listening from a distance. Wiping off specks of dirt from his ears on a blotting paper, he said, "Be sure, Baruah's son will occupy the magistrate's chair before our very eyes."

Gajen Tamuli looked out and said: "Let it be. He is fit to become a magistrate. Those we have now can hardly write

without correcting the sentence several times over. They have to write the judgements at home." Tamuli amongst the clerks was known for his able drafting. Examining a file minutely, Paresh Kataki added:

"Yes, you have so many graduates now. But hardly anyone can write in English as in the old days. Our own Bidya advocate writes so fluently and, well, how many graduates could compete with him? He is only a Matriculate."

All of them nodded in support. Education like all things has become more valuable with the passage of time, it is correct to say.

Shirastadar Dharani Phukan was coming in. Everyone got busy with his work. Paresh Kataki asked Mitharam peon who was so long listening to the conversation vacantly staring from a nearby table to take a file to the Shirastadar. This file was to have been sent up to the Deputy Commissioner on the previous day.

Dharani Phukan invoked silently the name of Goddess Durga and sat down on his chair. After a cursory glance at the files, he asked Mitharam if Mahikanta babu was there. Fixing the buttons of his overcoat, the Shirastadar stood up. Without looking at the clerks sitting in two rows on both sides, Shirastadar came straight to where Mahikanta was sitting. Mahikanta was told yesterday to write a draft on settlement of land. Having received the telegram conveying the examination results of his son, Mahikanta left office before 4 P.M. Today he was hurriedly on to his work on the draft but somehow he had not been able to go on writing. He had not been able to concentrate as everyone was asking him about his son. Mahikanta was a bit apprehensive that Shirastadar would be asking for the draft right now. But luck was on his side today. Shirastadar was coming to congratulate him. He had been so delighted on Kamalakanta securing a first

class that he would not have been happier even if his son had achieved the same. Actually, his son after making four unsuccessful attempts to pass the I.A. examination was now doing business.

"I said long ago that your son will achieve very good results. After all, he is your son. Are you to be considered not intelligent because you are a clerk? Let the lawyers see how brilliantly boys in the clerks' families are faring now. Do one thing now. Let your son apply for Civil Service. We have to take a good recommendation from Mr. Jameson when he is still there. He is going on leave. We have to do it before that. I shall take care of that."

It was said that Shirastadar knew of many official as well as personal secrets of the Deputy Commissioner. He used to keep the Deputy Commission on a tight leash – this was what the clerks said. The same Shirastadar who used to rebuke Mahikanta by saying "You are an under-metric; please be careful in your work. Government has issued circular against appointing under-metric persons," etc., had now come personally to him to assure him that he would arrange a recommendation from the Deputy Commissioner for his son. This made Mahikanta think as if his son was already a magistrate. All have a high opinion of him – everybody wants him to join the Civil Service – this was something beyond Mahikanta's imagination till then; his expectation all along had been that his son would become a school teacher at the most after passing his B.A. examination.

He had in fact requested Mr. Phukan, headmaster of the George Institution the other day for giving a chance to his son to work as a teacher. Mahikanta was ashamed that being the father, he was about to spoil the career of his son.

EIGHT

Kamalakanta filled in the application form for Civil Service on the insistence of his well-wishers although personally he was not too keen. Testimonials from a leading citizen had to be enclosed with the application for a candidate from the Dibrugarh region, a recommendation from Rai Bahadur Manik Hazarika was considered invaluable. Offer of appointment in one's favour depended to a great extent on the recommendation given by the Rai Bahadur since he was very much known to the Deputy Commissioner, the Commissioner and even the Governor.

Rai Bahadur rose in life through his own effort and perseverance. They say Manik Hazarika once known to people as Manik Mahari was in the very beginning of his career a salesman in a liquor shop run by a *mahaldar* who originally hailed from northern part of the country. As the *mahaldar* returned to his native province, Manik Mahari, helped financially by him, got an opium shop in his name. In those days, the Assamese were generally averse to running opium shops and considered it to be below their dignity. But the best way to become rich quickly was to sell smuggled opium. Manik Mahari had an easy access to this means of earning money and very soon it was like backing a winning horse in a race and money came rushing to his coffer. Those who earn money mainly through business have the guts

to invest it in a business enterprise. Like the spider spreading his web while remaining at one place, Manik Mahari spread his net far and wide, even when he was busy running his excise shop. Luck favoured him as always. The excise *mahaldar* was in no time transformed into a tea planter. When fortune favours a man, other things like respect and fame follow him wherever he goes. Very soon he became a nominated member of the municipality, of the local board and of the council. His status and influence increased with the public as well as the rulers. Like the sailing boat floating merely in mid-ocean Manik Hazarika now sailed along on life's ocean with great aplomb.

Kamalakanta heard quite a lot about the power and influence of the Rai Bahadur although some of it could have been a bit exaggerated. But he had no scope to come in contact with him. Kamalakanta had been passing by his residence many times in the past since his school days. But whenever he crossed that large bungalow, quite unconsciously he cast his head downward in silence. He had not seen the holy book of scripture kept on a high pedestal in the village *Namghar* but he could see the sacred cloth with which it was covered. Similarly he had seen the surrounding concrete walls of the residence of Rai Bahadur but had not seen what was inside nor was he too curious to know about it.

He has been told by someone that Rai Bahadur liked to meet visitors in the forenoon. This was the time when his mood was not yet upset by price fluctuations in the tea market or by the rank inefficiency of his clerical staff. Normally during the period he would be in a reasonably pleasant and receptive mood.

It was Monday according to the calculations, an auspicious time. Kamalakanta woke up earlier than usual. He was determined to leave his house by 7 A.M. sharp. But before he could finish taking his morning tea and snacks, it was 6.30 A.M. He decided

what he would wear the previous night itself. He put on a freshly washed *dhoti* and a shirt and a new pair of shoes. He would look boyish with only the shirt on. He brought out the coat from the suitcase kept under the bedstead and put it on. The coat was lying in the suitcase for a long time. Stitched two years back, it was now several inches shorter. The shirt would not go with it even if one tried to stretch it by using both hands: it was not amenable at all. As years pass – men grow longer but the shirts grow shorter – this profound discovery dawned on Kamalakanta for the first time.

Kamalakanta was looking at his wrist watch frequently. Ten minutes passed, he could not still wear the coat. Throwing the shirt on the bed, he got a shawl brought by his younger sister Makoni. He is not used to taking a shawl. Makoni smiled seeing his elder brother in a new dress. Everyone has his own typical dress as he has his own manner or gait. The moment he or she departs from this normal way, it looks somewhat like pretension or make-believe. Putting the shawl on top, Kamalakanta could not resist laughing at himself. Time has running out. There was no need for the shawl. Kamalakanta put the shirt on and went out; the new pair of shoes was making a screeching sound all the way. Kamalakanta thought that it would take him at least half an hour to reach the residence of the Rai Bahadur. But his enthusiasm got the better of him and he could hardly recall by which way he came or how long it took him to reach there. When he stood before the wide gates of the Rai Bahadur's house, it was still 20 minutes to 8 A.M. Rai Bahadur would not normally finish his breakfast before 8 A.M. There was no point in going inside before that. When he looked around, he could see that the door was made of fine wood, the type he did not see anywhere earlier. It seemed to give an entirely first look. Through the closed door, his eyes peeping through the holes, he saw the inside. The

bungalow stood quite away from the main gate. The front was covered by creepers and shrubs. There was no way one could be sure if there was anyone in the verandah of the house. Kamalakanta decided to spend the remaining minutes walking up and down the road.

Unless there is some urgent need, time like an old bullock prefers to stand still. Time in an examination hall flies like an aeroplane. Kamalakanta was almost fed up looking at the watch repeatedly. The minutes' hand did not seem to move at all! Did he forget to wind the clock after getting up from sleep? Shaking his hand, he brought the watch near his ears to find out if it was ticking all right, "No... I shall not look at the watch till at least five minutes are past and let me walk up to that tree." But he could hardly reach up to that spot. Thinking that he might be delayed, he turned back. He looked at the watch once more even though he resolved that he would not look at it for five minutes. Minutes' hand was moving slowly like on days when you had nothing worthwhile to do after the examination was over. "Look, only three minutes are gone by after such a long period! No, how long you can go on walking like this?" There were still five minutes to 8 A.M. Kamalakanta pushed the wheeled gate very carefully and went inside.

There are rows of deodar and palm trees on both sides of the path going from the gate to the bungalow. There is a flower garden, a flowering bed of exotic and seasonal flowers on the front. Like the beauty of a deer horn spreading out in several directions, the trees and vines provided a thick cover all around the bungalow adding to its beauty and gravity. Kamalakanta, going up the steps of the staircase, with a bit of trepidation stood on the wide verandah. On the verandah there was a variety of furniture arranged neatly. Kamalakanta, undecided as to where he ought to sit or stand, kept standing for sometime. However,

considering that it was not at all good for his self-respect to stand like that for long he sat on a chair kept on the side placing the weight of his body softly and waited anxiously for someone to come from inside.

Kamalakanta did not realise how long he was sitting thus like the meditative Buddha. He was hesitant to lift his hand and see his wrist watch. Amid this exasperating silence, he heard the sweet sound of soft footsteps all of a sudden. Like a deer listening intently to the sound of a flute at a distance, Kamalakanta was all attention while awaiting for the coming of the foot steps towards him. In a moment a slim girl with a lishesome body, a *chador* with the colour of a beautiful Kanchan flower spread over her, stood smiling on the verandah before him. Not at all prepared to see her Kamalakanta stood awhile in silent surprise not knowing how to receive her or greet her properly. The youngest daughter of Rai Bahadur was taken by surprise seeing Kamalakanta on the verandah. Restraining herself she asked : "Do you want to meet my father? Please wait, I am going to tell him. He is actually coming out in a moment."

The fragrance of an exotic perfume spread around, her body exhibited the posture of a fine curve as Suprova disappeared inside. Kamalakanta's keen eyes followed her steps behind the door screen entranced as if like the rats of Hamelin. As she walked on tip toe, her feet concealed so long by the soft cover of the colour of a Champak blossom were bared. Kamalakanta looked at those beautiful toes and the smooth skin with an eager pair of eyes.

Students of Dibrugarh, both boys and girls knew Kamalakanta to be a brilliant student. Kamalakanta used to take part in literary and other gatherings and occasionally read patriotic compositions and philosophical essays in the meeting of the A.S.L. Club held at Amolapatty. There was no easier route

to fame than literature in our country. It would not be too much to say that there would be thirty to forty girls who silently worshipped Kamalakanta even though he did not know them. Rai Bahadur's youngest daughter Suprova was in class X of the Girls' High School. She remembered seeing Kamalakanta many times in the past. She heard that he had secured first class in Philosophy. Graduates usually came to her father for securing his recommendation. Kamalakanta too came for the same purpose – it was as clear to her or appeared as simple as the pictorial letters in the first text of a primary school.

Rai Bahadur was getting ready to visit a big tea garden after finishing his breakfast. His daughter came out to see if the driver had taken the car out of the garage and made it ready. Hearing that the son of Mahikanta, the clerk, has come, Rai Bahadur asked his daughter to send a cup of tea there, and he came out himself.

Mahikanta is known to Rai Bahadur, he did not have any occasion to know his son, though; he had read about him in the *Times of Assam* last week. He felt happy that a first class university graduate has come to him seeking a favour. One who is not able to achieve something which he or she had aspired for, develops an intense desire for it as well as respect for the person who is able to achieve it. Rai Bahadur was usually in the habit of turning away many a graduate with an apparent show of disdain for modern education and he used to advise 'Go, go, join business and make money.' In his heart of hearts he could not but praise and even respect them, all the more.

Hearing the sound of Rai Bahadur's entry, Kamalakanta resolved that he would not make a second mistake and promptly stood up from his chair and showed his respect by saluting Rai Bahadur. As Rai Bahadur entered pushing the curtains aside, Kamalakanta uttered, 'Good morning, sir' and bowed.

'Congratulations, young man,' Rai Bahadur addressed him and stretched out his hand, and then shook his hands warmly. 'Come in, come in,' he said and entered the room. Kamalakanta followed him.

Only a privileged person is usually asked to sit in the drawing room. The room has curtains all around; the curtains were multi-coloured like a rainbow. There is a red carpet, soft like fur on the floor; it seems to raise one's feet softly as soon as one steps upon it by walking. Many a fine chair with raised top, a fine sofa and small tables are neatly placed; there are teapoys placed here and there covered with a top of stained glass. There are framed photographs, ivory and brass replicas of animal figures and on the wall are hung precious landscape paintings of oil on canvas, two Naga spears and a finely woven traditional bamboo headgear with a flowery design are hanging from the wall that opens out to the balcony. A piece of fine embroidery made in wool and yarn is framed and kept hanging on the wall showing the artists' love of beauty.

Rai Bahadur sat down on the sofa brusquely and asked Kamalakanta to sit down. Kamalakanta sat on the sofa close to where Rai Bahadur was sitting. Sitting on the broad sofa and letting his body weight fall on it, Kamalakanta was reminded of the story of Humayun being helped to the throne by the water carrier and a faint smile appeared on his face.

After an exchange of few words, the conversation got going and the stiffness of the earlier introduction was gradually replaced by relaxed conversation. Kamalakanta explained the purpose of his coming over to Rai Bahadur. He pressed Rai Bahadur to help even otherwise apart from giving a certificate. Rai Bahadur agreed to help him. He reminded him that to help a person of his own locality was his duty and not a matter of obliging anybody.

"But, did not you have honours in Philosophy?"

"Yes."

"Bentick Saheb does not like those who have Philosophy and Sanskrit. He always prefers English and Economics."

"Last year's recruits from our valley – both the two persons had Philosophy."

With a faint smile on his lips Rai Bahadur said: "Oh, you are speaking of Sarma and Deka? I had quite a fight as I sent up their names. I could do so only after I arrived at some understanding with members of the other valley. I had a clash with the Commissioner in the open meeting. Lastly, his Excellency had to be approached."

Rai Bahadur understood very well that since Kamalakanta secured first class, he could become a Sub-Deputy Collector without help from any quarter. For the last two years, University examination result was the main criterion for giving nomination. But if this was divulged to Kamalakanta, how would the status and influence of the Board member be protected? How was the good name of the generous and well-meaning Rai Bahadur be maintained otherwise? Looking at the pallor of Kamalakanta's face, Rai Bahadur understood that his medicine had proved its efficacy. Realising his helpless condition, Kamalakanta was almost pleading for help as he looked at Rai Bahadur. Manik Hazarika knew instinctively the ways of influencing men through appropriate words and in proper time. All his words bear fruit like the seeds sown in summer.

After a few moments of thoughtful silence, Rai Bahadur said, "Of course, you have a better claim. For several years running our Dibrugarh has remained unrepresented in the Provincial Civil Service. This matter shall have to be raised this time in the board. In the meantime, if I meet the Commissioner,

I shall make a mention of it. You know, the Commissioner is quite adamant. It is very difficult to persuade him."

Suprova entered the room with tea on a silver tray. Keeping the tray near her father, Suprova was about to go in when her father said, "My dear, do you know him? He has passed out his B.A. with brilliant results this year!"

Suprova turned towards Kamalakanta – an angelic smile on her face. She took the tea cup from the tray and offered it to Kamalakanta. Kamalakanta stretched forward a bit to take the cup with his hand.

"You have stood first?"

"I shall know the position when the gazette is out. I don't expect to stand first."

Kamalakanta was a bit embarrassed by his own self-effacing humility. He sipped tea looking downward.

"Brilliant boys always underrate themselves." Saying this Suprova took out a pictorial magazine from the table and started turning over its pages in attentively, ignoring the presence of Kamalakanta. Rai Bahadur smiled showing his sense of pride on his daughter. All the glory of a first class first withered at the sight of such towering indifference, Kamalakanta's face warmed up in utter shame and discomfiture. He hesitated to talk to Rai Bahadur as long as the girl was there. He was ashamed to ask when he should come for taking the certificate. However ignorant one may be, a man will not usually like to appear small in the presence of a woman. Man's self-respect or self-reliance becomes more pronounced in such cases.

Lifting his eyes from the tea cup, Kamalakanta looked towards Suprova. He began to sweat because of his sense of discomfiture. He silently condemned the very idea of progress and woman's liberty by the fact that Suprova was not stirring out of the drawing room.

Having a last sip on the tea and softly wiping his mouth with the handkerchief, Rai Bahadur asked: "Are you not joining M.A. now?"

"I have received a letter from Prof. Thomas. He has asked me to proceed for the M.A. course. There is possibility of securing the post-graduate scholarship."

Kamalakanta wanted that something relating to his achievement would be asked. His reply now restored his lost sense of pride and self-confidence.

"Yes. It is better to join the M.A. course for the time being. You would get to know the famous professors of the University. Staying in Calcutta for some length of time is itself an education."

Taking out the silver case for cigarettes from the pocket, he lighted one. Now getting up from the couch, Rai Bahadur said: "I think, you are going home now? Come, with me. I am going by the road near your house. I shall drop you on way." Having said these words, Rai Bahadur reached the verandah.

NINE

The antecedents of the family were impeccable. Father was well-to-do. She was the only daughter; good-looking and accomplished too. Also related to the intimate friend of his son. The boy had already given his consent. The two horoscopes also tallied. Indeed the match was ideal. Moreover, the girl had been offered. How could the proposal be rejected? But the girl was far away and there would be additional expenses on that account. However, this expenditure could be met by the bride's father. Should he take money and put his son to sale? Considering all the pros and cons, particularly the welfare of the family as a whole, Mahikanta Barua wrote back to the bride's father Bapuram Bora accepting the proposal. The date would be fixed, he informed, after the examination results of his son were out.

It is the good fortune of the parents to be able to give away their daughter in marriage to a worthy boy. Giving one's daughter in marriage not only means the fulfillment of a social obligation, it also means that the family has also been expanded. It is well said that the eldest son-in-law is like one's eldest son. Marriage is a sacred institution. But the whole thing to a great extent depends on lady luck for its eventual success.

As soon as the letter of consent from Dibrugarh was received, Bapuram's wife became restive. They had no other child

except their only daughter. It was by God's grace that they have got as good and educated a bridegroom as Kamalakanta. Tagar's mother offered one rupee to the household god. She pledged a gold flower for the particular god's sacred altar which was from their house. She called Gandhia Bapu and arranged for the performance of a Puja for the good god Satyanarayana on a Saturday.

Jealous people were not rare in the village. Bapuram knew of many marriages being broken by such people by writing anonymous letters conveying false information about the character of the bride. Therefore he asked his wife to keep the news a secret till the date was fixed. There was no chance of it being leaked out from the Mauzadar's house – the marriage had been fixed through the mediation of Krishnadatta.

For sometime neighbours were marking some change coming over the wife of Bapuram. Whoever came to her house, she received with more than usual enthusiasm and talked and offered betelnut showing lot of warmth as if they were close relatives of hers. She said to Rangili Bai offering her a betelnut piece as she was about to go : "Bai, you are my kith and kin. Please do not desert us at any time."

Keeping the betelnut piece on her mouth, Rangili said, "Oh need you tell me about that? Fishes have to take care of the water in the same way as the water supports the fish. To whom should I go to beg leaving you? Did I ever fail to stand by you in times of need."

"Why should I say that? We may die but certainly we are not ungrateful."

"Has the date been fixed?"

"No, not so far. The boy is appearing in the examination. Once the results are known, the date shall have to be fixed."

"Let it be. Earlier you can send the girl out, the better it is. I told you before. You daughter is a real Lakshmi. It is her good luck that you have got a bridegroom to match."

"It is all due to your blessing."

Rangili after spitting the betelnut juice from her mouth left for her home.

There was a Ramayana printed by Bordoloi in the house of Bapuram Bora. The pages were worn, some printed pages which were missing were replaced by handwritten ones, and the pages had lost the original colour. Bora was not lending it to others fearing that it could be damaged if it was not read carefully. Some women who could read were coming to their house to read it there itself whenever they wanted. Maheswar Bapu's wife had just finished reading the book and was about to discuss something that was supposed to be in the scripture with the wife of Bapuram Bora. Meanwhile, she was chewing the betelnut offered to her.

"Are you doing everything to give your daughter in marriage? Had she been a Brahmin girl like ours, you would have had grandchildren by this time. The sooner these liabilities are cleared the better it is."

Tagar left the place quietly.

Bora's wife was expecting this question from her for quite sometime. Taking the chance to broach that topic, she almost crawled towards the wife of Maheswar Bapu in an effort to maintain the secrecy of the water and said : "A boy has, more or less, been fixed."

"Oh, very good. This is a matter of great satisfaction. But where is the boy from?"

"From Dibrugarh."

"Dibrugarh? Is it not the Dibrugarh, near Sadiya. You have gone too far to give your daughter! Did you not get someone

near about? How will you live giving your daughter away to such a distant place? You would not be able to meet your son-in-law and daughter during Bihu. Why did you decide to send her so far?"

"The boy is college educated. He is from a good family."

Bapu's wife looked up, her face showing signs of disbelief and asked: "Has he studied as far as Mauzadar's son?"

"He has studied two years longer than their son-in-law. He has read upto B.A. class, of course, I don't know what exactly it means."

During the wedding of Mauzadar's daughter, Bapu's wife was not received too well. Even she had to sit with the woman from non-Brahmin families. This treatment in the Mauzadar's family still rankled in her mind. Learning that the would-be-son-in-law of Bapuram Bora was more educated than the son-in-law of Mauzadar, Bapu's wife was too happy and asked: "He has then read as much as Jagannath Barooah. Considering that, he would certainly be having a good job, is not it? Mauzadar's son has become a school teacher with much lesser education."

She heard from her husband indirectly that there was every possibility of their would be son-in-law becoming a Sub-Deputy Collector or a Magistrate but she did not have the courage to speak it out openly. Moreover, who in the village would believe even if she told anyone that their son-in-law would be appointed a Sub-Deputy Collector? To please Bapu's wife, she said: "We want the blessings of all; What can you do alone?"

"Yes. Yes, everything depends on God's kindness, everything is destined. But please note that it is the woman's good luck that could turn the man's fortunes also. Your daughter is lucky. She will be married to a good person. The girl's father has given her a good education, and now she has a good husband matching her in every way. Since the boy is so well-educated, he

is sure to become a lawyer, certainly. One need not have to worry on that."

Bapu's wife was filled with a sense of satisfaction because she was taken into confidence by the wife of Bapuram Bora and in that mood, left the house.

Since they had the good fortune of giving her daughter in marriage to a college educated boy, it would not do to be miserly in giving gift of articles like clothing. They may not be able to give lot of ornaments but there would be no difficulty in giving the garments of a variety of designs which could be woven in the family loom. These garments should suffice for two to three years; otherwise she would have to ask her-in-law's house to provide the wear. There were two looms in the house but Bora's wife was not satisfied and she had gone about placing orders for a variety of garments wherever she had the chance to do so. She started weaving a pair herself in her own family loom.

For sometime, a government weaving instructor had been teaching a new floral design to the girls in the village in a new type of loom. An improved loom made of steel had been placed on the Mauzadar's porch. The women, old and young, were coming there during noontime and learning the new process slowly. Having put the material on the loom, Bapuram Bora's wife made enquiries about Dharani Kalita, the weaving teacher.

Dharani Kalita hailed from Nagaon district. He was quite young but not boyish, well-built, neither very tall nor short. His physique was well-formed, face showing the first flush of youth. There was shyness in the look of his eyes. Bapuram Bora's wife seeing the tender young man said "They were calling you the instructor – I thought it would be an old man. But now I see, you are too young."

Dharani smiled and looked downward. Dharani showed the book containing the different floral designs to the wife of

Bapuram Bora. What would be the type of design in the corners – where would be the bee or the butterfly – Dharani showed his fine taste and skill in explaining all this very clearly. Seeing a young boy so skilled in the art of weaving, Bora's wife was highly impressed. She was weaving all her life, the flower design she made so many times yet there could be no comparison with the design that Dharani showed to her.

Tagar's mother saw that Dharani was very polite and shy. She developed an affection for him instantly. After a few visits, Dharani developed an intimacy with Bapuram Bora. Dharani was made to feel very close to them mainly due to the motherly affection showered on him by Bora's wife.

It was the wife's nudging that made Bapuram Bora call Khorgeswar, the goldsmith. The goldsmith began his work in the house and all the gold in the family was brought out in order to have the ornaments made by him. The wife was not satisfied even then. She gave the old earrings and an old necklace to the goldsmith for remaking.

She also got made a few ornaments of 'Bengal design' by supplying the design from a book which she procured from the Mauzadar's house with some difficulty.

But it is often the good fortune that betrays a man. Before the day of the wedding could be fixed, descending like a storm the Bird of Death in one sudden swoop took away the wife of Bapuram Bora. In a moment the hall of festive joy was converted into a house of tears. The good woman died before the very eyes of her husband – this was the consolation of the family.

The marriage of Tagar and Kamalakanta which would have been held shortly had to be postponed.



TEN

As Rai Bahadur's grey Pontiac car kept on coming frequently to the narrow by-lane at Amolapatty, lined up with palm trees on both sides, the neighbours became quite curious and started speculating on the likely reason.

Someone said, "Kamalakanta's luck had turned. When Rai Bahadur Manik Hazarika was interested himself, it was a matter of time before Kamalakanta was appointed as a magistrate. Rai Bahadur was quite a tiger in the pursuit of his prey: 'He would not leave anything half done.'

"He is a first class honours graduate. He will catch the government by its neck and get the job. What is the need for the Rai Bahadur's backing?"

Those who did not like to credit the Rai Bahadur with such power or influence said:

"Rai Bahadur will give his daughter or the job? Why should Rai Bahadur exert so much to place the son of Mahikanta, the clerk, in the Provincial Civil Service? You know Manik Mahari, don't you? He was twice caught in an opium smuggling case. Fortunately, Mr. Hailey was there, that saved him. Advocate Dowerah earned a lot of money in the process."

"Planter's daughter will step into the house of the clerk? What do you say? Has a boy become so scarce for Rai Bahadur to give his daughter in marriage? What happened to all those planters of Jorhat? Where will Kamalakanta keep the white elephant? How will he maintain her?"

"Need you worry on that? A cheque from the Rai Bahadur will do the trick."

"Even then, how could he give his daughter in marriage to Kamalakanta?"

"Education, my friend, education, first class honours. Anybody can earn a lot of money. But how many could secure first class in Calcutta University? Rai Bahadur must have thought carefully before thinking of the son of the clerk? The word mistake is not in his dictionary, do you know?"

Possibility of a sudden change coming over the life of one of their colleagues stirred a hornet's nest among the neighbours. Rajkhowa started abusing his son, a class ten student when he returned home late one evening after a game of football:

"Playing games, that's all. If you only had given only half the attention to studies! No, I cannot expect anything from you. Others' sons are passing one examination after another standing first – our own son is neglecting his studies."

Examination was still far off. The boy wondered why his father had kicked up a row over examination and studies all of a sudden. Did the old man have a few pegs today, the boy thought.

"If you are going towards the market, bring a shirt for our youngest son. He has nothing to wear," said the wife of Shirastadar Dharani Phukan as the latter was about to go out for his evening walk.

Dharani Shirastadar was usually in the habit of going by what his wife said. His good luck had been brought by his wife –

this was his firm conviction. But today he was provoked even by the words of such a good wife.

"You are responsible for spoiling all our sons. The two eldest are gone beyond redemption and now, are you now after this one? You are always speaking of dhotis and shirts. Did you ever speak of their studies?"

Dharani Phukan walked out with a grave face. Their two sons had left studies after I.A. long time ago. How could they now become the subject of her husband's annoyance – Phukan's wife could not understand anything at all.

Rai Bahadur's car stopped almost everyday in front of the house of Mahikanta causing ripples of discontent to surface in the placid waters of a poor clerk's daily life. Time is evening. Rai Bahadur gets down from the car and is about to enter the sitting room of Mahikanta. Hearing the sound of a car, the children, some of them with barest of clothing, children from the clerks' families and their descendants came near the car like as many Lilliputs surrounding Gulliver. Some of them reached the car's body and felt its smoothness : Others were kneeling or lying down and then looking at the parts of the car, trying to unravel its mystery. A few got up on the car from outside as if on a footboard, but disappeared the moment the driver looked sternly and admonished them.

Mahikanta's two sons. Fesu and Milika rushed inside to inform their father as soon as they saw the car stop near their gate. Keeping aside the hookah, which he was smoking, Mahikanta came out, putting on a shirt, wet with sweat. Rai Bahadur spoke to him standing for a few moments and then got back to the car. Closing the door abruptly, the driver took the car away. A few boys, peeved that they had no chance of a ride in the car consoled themselves by throwing a few stones in its direction.

Fesu and Milika reached the road in the meantime. The two boys understood that the coming of Rai Bahadur and his car to their house was a matter of pride. That they had some relationship with the Rai Bahadur's family made them strut around in front of their companions, with their heads held high. Fesu, even picked up a quarrel with a few other boys who threw stones at the car.

Inside the house, Mahikanta's wife was impatient to know as to why Rai Bahadur came at that unusual time and whether, there was any news about her son's appointment in govt. service. As soon as the husband came in, she offered a freshly filled hookah for smoking and asked him the reason of the Rai Bahadur's going away so quickly even without entering their house.

Putting his mouth to the hookah Mahikanta said, "Jibeswar Adhyapak of Kamrup has come. He is a well-known astrologer who lived in Benaras for twelve years. He is staying as a guest of Rai Bahadur. He is due to leave day after tomorrow. He has asked me to show the horoscope of our son. He would have it examined by the astrologer if the horoscope could be sent to their house."

"Why should you send it to the Rai Bahadur's house? It is not proper to open the horoscope before everybody, can we not invite the astrologer to our house."

"What do you say? How can you invite him? His charge will not be less than Rupees twenty."

"Let him not see we cannot send the boy's horoscope like that."

Drawing a long puff from the pipe, Mahikanta smiled and said : "It is for nothing that God has made you a female? Don't you understand why Rai Bahadur wants the horoscope of our eldest son to be examined by the astrologer?"

"Why?"

"He wants to see if the horoscope of his daughter matches with that of our son," Mahikanta laughed. His wife asked in a grave voice, "Did he tell you like that?"

"Is it necessary to say that? Do you think I have lost all my intelligence because of my working as a clerk? If that's not the reason, why should Rai Bahadur be interested in having your son's fortunes calculated by paying twenty rupees?"

"Why is it at all required to compare the horoscope with his daughter's?"

"Wait, wait, please don't get angry. May be, he will offer his daughter for marriage with our son."

"Let him do so. What difference will it make? He is already engaged to a girl. Why should we try to fix up with Rai Bahadur's daughter," She said without understanding the meaning of her husband's smile.

"Why should we not fix up, if he offers," he looked sternly at his wife.

"But..."

"What is the 'but' there? Bapuram's daughter cannot be married for a year. Should our son keep on waiting?"

"The girl who has now lost her mother has been kept in the hope for so long... If we break the engagement now, will it not be too bad. It is difficult to give a daughter in marriage. If the marriage breaks once, others will be chary of taking her to their family. One cannot do this even to one's enemies."

"What is our fault? We cannot harm our son trying to rescue another's daughter."

"Now as if only Rai Bahadur's will rescue us... leave it, please do not speak like this again."

"Oh... you do not understand anything. If your son becomes a magistrate – please keep in mind it is through the help of Rai Bahadur."

"Leave it. If you want to swim test yourself with your own hands. If you cannot swim get drowned. They have given the boy stipend of forty rupees due to brilliant results in the examination... they will in the same way... offer him a job."

Smiling sarcastically Mahikanta said, "It is not for nothing that the women are said to be short of understanding. Unless there is some influence or a strong backing no one gets a job these days. Let your son pass B.A. and M.A. examination as many times as he likes, but without the backing of a man like Rai Bahadur he cannot hope to be appointed as a Sub-Deputy Collector."

"If you bring the daughter of a tea planter in the hope of your son becoming a big officer, you will lose the son and the daughter-in-law both. Let not my son become a magistrate. I shall not accept an educated and fashionable girl as my daughter-in-law."

Changing the grave look on his face, Mahikanta said, "It seems you are much annoyed with the Rai Bahadur's family. He is a tea planter, no doubt but he has no vanity. The family also abides by all the rules of sanctity in living."

Without putting an end to the topic right now. Mahikanta said, "Don't be so impatient. Rai Bahadur may not offer his daughter's marriage proposal after all. How the boy will react to the proposal, we don't know yet."

"Let him offer or not offer. Who is going to ask for his daughter? Why should the boy break the engagement, which he had himself come forward to accept having seen the girl? Who can change what is in one's destiny?"

"All right. All right. The hookah is not burning it seems" and taking the hookah in hand, Kamalakanta's mother entered the kitchen.

ELEVEN

Puja vacation was to end shortly. Kamalakanta was scheduled to leave for Calcutta within two days. Before that, Rai Bahadur invited Mahikanta Baruah and his family for tea at his residence. Kamalakanta asked his mother not to take his younger brothers and sisters lest they made a nuisance of themselves by crying and whining as was their normal habit even in the Rai Bahadur's place. His mother, greatly peeved said angrily. "Our son wants to disown his brothers and sisters even before he has married Rai Bahadur's daughter. No dear, we are small fries, what is the need for our children to show their faces in the house of such big people? They need not go, we are not going. You go alone and have a good meal."

After a lot of pleading and entreaties Kamalakanta was finally able to make his mother change her mind and agree to go. He made his brother and sister wear the good clothes which they were given at the time of the Puja. He searched for the same himself, combed their hair and sprinkled perfume on them. He took out his handkerchief and put them inside the pockets of the half-pants worn by Fesu and Milika. As the small pockets swelled as a result, Fesu and Milika were overjoyed, thumping their pockets with their hands. Seeing their elder brother display

so much of affection for his younger brothers and sisters, Makoni smiled mischievously.

The court was closed. Mahikanta Barua was in his house for the whole day. He got the buttons of her shirt fixed by his daughter in the noon. He had shoes repaired and polished by the cobbler paying four annas. As arranged before, Rai Bahadur's car stopped in front of Barua's house at 4 P.M. sharp. Hearing the horn of the car, Fesu and Milika, who were already dressed up, rushed outside to be near the car. Makoni came out holding the hand of her younger sister Renukoni. They were followed by Kamalakanta. Kamalakanta's mother came out last wearing her fine silk with a flowery design and a golden border at the end of it but she stretched it upwards to use it as a veil.

The reception of a family of a clerk did not call for any elaborate preparation but this time Rai Bahadur's wife came out personally as soon as the car stopped to receive the visitors. She even kissed Renukoni on both cheeks ignoring her dripping nose. Rai Bahadur was waiting on the verandah. Finding no other topic to start the conversation, he looked towards Mahikanta and asked him : "Did the car go in time? These drivers are not to be trusted in such matters."

"Yes. It did reach in time. Actually we are late in coming because of the children." Mahikanta added even though it was not true.

"Yes. You need not tell me. The womenfolk won't dress up and get ready before one hour – this is the usual thing."

Rai Bahadur smiled and looked towards his wife. His wife smiled quietly under the cover of her veil and then turning her face and drawing her veil a bit longer, she climbed the staircase. Kamalakanta's mother and the children then followed inside.

Rai Bahadur with the father and the son came to the drawing room.

Kamalakanta's mother had come for the first time to the house of someone like the Rai Bahadur. She was enthralled by the fine glitter of the furniture and the painted canvas hanging on the wall.

The room where she was sitting also had a fine and elaborate decor, with the chairs and the tables, nicely placed. Seeing the broad sofas, she could not decide at first whether those were meant for sitting or sleeping. It was good that Rai Bahadur's wife grasped her by the hand and made her sit! Fesu and Milika declaring their intention to sit there, sat down near their mother with the shoes on. The new cover coming from Calcutta had just been put there: Rai Bahadur's wife heart shrank seeing it being treated so roughly.

Suprova entered the room after sometime. Mahikanta Barua's wife asked, "Is she not your eldest daughter?" The mother told her daughter, "Oh you are staying there. Please come near."

While speaking Rai Bahadur's wife dropped the 'usual homely' way in which she used to address her daughter and spoke with a more dignified tone: she was to do this always in front of the guests. As soon as Suprova came nearer, Mahikanta Barua's wife lifted her face up and kissed her on the forehead. Suprova nearly turned her face away from the betelnut smell coming out of the old lady's mouth. As soon as she could get away, Suprova took the scented handkerchief kept inside her blouse and wiped out the specks of betelnut juice from her forehead.

Wife of Barua asked, "Where is she studying now ?"

"She will be appearing in the matriculation examination next year. She is not to go for higher studies. Her father wants to send her to college. Our daughter is not going to take up a job, then why should she study in college? She should properly learn the household work. What do you say?"

"You have put it well. There is no point. Your daughter is not going to be a school mistress or a doctor. Does she know weaving?" She gave the reply herself quickly thinking that the question was not too proper. "Of course, there is no need for your daughter to learn weaving. Still, it is better to acquire the skill."

As soon as she heard the question posed by Barua's wife, the mother looked towards the daughter and said, "Go, dear, bring the Mekhela piece kept in the front drawer of the cupboard." As soon as the daughter left, Rai Bahadur's wife said, "Our daughter is not shy like other girls when it comes to weaving although she too is going to school. She did weave a pair of Mekhela with some help from Makhon's mother during the Puja holidays. I did not have any time to spare to sit near the loom."

"Where is the time for you since you have to manage this big household?"

Taking the mekhela from Suprova, Barua's wife said, "Let me see." The end of it is yet to be stitched. Touching the fine flowery design on it, Barua's wife said : "Where did you get this design? This is yet to be seen in this region."

"Perhaps she got in some design book brought from outside. Now-a-days our own designs are disappearing and instead everyone is using the Bengali books of design."

Rai Bahadur's wife purchased this cloth at twenty rupees from Pijon Bai a few days back. This has now become the subject for showering praise on Suprova. Feeling a bit hesitant to elaborate on this false statement in front of her daughter, she said "Please, dear, see if tea and snacks have been served outside. Have it sent to the children here."

Looking towards the daughter, just going out of the room, the mother said, "She is my right hand. During her holidays she

has to take over everything from cooking to supervision of all other work in this household. Her father won't take tea unless it is made by the daughter."

"You need not tell me, really. She is the one who makes the house full of light."

Calling the cook, who kept the tray on the table somewhat in an unsteady manner, she said, "Baputi, are you arranging for her on the floor of the kitchen house?" Baputi nodded 'yes', and came out of the room

"Let me call your son inside. He is so shy. He will hardly eat anything sitting there with my husband." Rai Bahadur's wife went out to call Kamalakanta.

Since there was none sitting close by, Barua's wife looked towards Makoni and told her, "See how hardworking she is, even though she is a rich man's daughter. You make a long face when you are asked to perform small tasks."

As the mother was talking to her daughter Fesu and Milika got up and came to the table, where tea and snacks were kept. They were trying to judge which of the dishes contained more but did not dare to place their hands on it. At that moment, Kamalakanta and the Suprova's mother entered the room. Asking Kamalakanta to sit and offering him tea and snacks on the tray she said, "Why should a college student be so shy? Tomorrow or the day after, you will become a Munsiff or a Magistrate. How it will do for you to be so shy?" She looked towards Barua's wife without finishing her sentence: there was a bright smile on her face too! Offering the dishes to Fesu and Milika, she, looking towards Makoni, said, "Come dear, give something to your younger sister."

Getting a hint from the mother's eyes, Makoni came near the table with Renukoni. Before Makoni could reach, Fesu ate up

the sweet given to him and snatched and put into his mouth very quickly the sweet which was on Milika's dish. Milika cried disconsolately and sat down on the floor. Kamalakanta was all along looking at his two brothers and was apprehending deep trouble. He could not drink the tea even though he took it to his mouth as he was deeply ashamed of Milika's crying and his behaviour. Rai Bahadur's wife understood everything and told Milika "Please don't cry, I will give you one more" and she consoled Milika by holding him by the hand. Even the dumb will speak if offered something to eat: Milika stopped crying and said in one breath, "I should be given two – two more."

"Eat my boy, I shall give you four, not two." Rai Bahadur's wife touched Milika's head in a show of affection.

Fesu thought what a fool he had proved himself to be! Milika would be getting four having lost one! He swallowed the one he had already in his mouth and spoke to Rai Bahadur's wife, "I must get the same too." "All right," said Rai Bahadur's wife and then smiled and went inside the kitchen.

In his deep embarrassment and shame, Kamalakanta even in the cold of November evening, started sweating all over. As Suprova's mother went in, Kamalakanta looked sternly towards his mother. His look implied that his mother had done some wrong by bringing Fesu and Milika with them. Noticing the look of disapproval in her son's face, his mother, twisting her face in an ironic grimace spoke to him : "What do you mean by looking at me like that? If they are children, it is natural for them to ask for more. Should that make your long nose shorter?" Despite his reluctance, Kamalakanta sipped his tea and tried to ignore affecting indifference. But he had a downcast look all the time.

Having had her refreshment sitting on the clean floor of the kitchen preserving her usual ritual purity, Barua's wife came out with a toothpick, eagerly cleansing her teeth. She sat in the

drawing room. After the betelnut session was over, her mother told Suprova, "Now, dear will you not sing a *Bargeet* for your aunt"?

Being addressed as aunt, Barua's wife was elated and she felt proud.

"What song should I sing mother?" Without waiting for an answer, Suprova went near the piano kept in a corner. It was dark inside. Suprova switched on the light on the wall behind the Piano. The room was suddenly filled with a golden light. Milika and Renukonni started laughing in merriment.

As the daughter sat on a stool near the piano, her mother said, "Sing that Krishna song."

Lifting her upper garment with care and deep restraint, she removed the hair kissing her cheek with her hand. Playing the Piano softly, Suprova said, "Oh, that one! I have been singing it everyday."

Soft waves of sound came from the piano slowly. Along with the sounds, the voice came trailing as if in a crescendo of a wave.

Looking at the girl, surpassingly beautiful with entranced eyes, Kamalakanta's mother asked, "Whose is this *Bargeet*? Is it composed by the great saint?"

Pride in the achievement of the girl was now clearly visible in the bright eyes of the wife of Bai Bahadur Hazarika. Pitying the ignorance of Barua's wife, she said slowly, "No, this is not a *Bargeet*, this is a composition of the famous Bengali poet, Rabindranath."

Students of Philosophy are generally allergic to song and dance as well as games. Kamalakanta is a brilliant student of his College. He has been so long avoiding the company of both. But Suprova's melodious voice and its wavy vibrations touched the tender heart of Kamalakanta.

T W E L V E

There is a weekly market at Morongi every Saturday. Bapuram Bora returned from the market, had his midday meal, and was resting reclining on an arm chair on the porch. It being November, there was no inclination to have a siesta. He just closed his eyes and was dozing off. Some one was trying to open the front gate. He woke up opening his eyes involuntarily hearing the sound. It was Dharmeswar, the postman. It was a market day, as such a day fixed for distribution of mail. Bapuram cast off the drowsiness as he wanted to read the letter. He outstretched his hand to receive the letter. Adults and the young alike are delighted when a letter comes from the post office. Let the letter be about anything under the sun : it may be a booklist from the bookshop or a catalogue of Ayurvedic medicines from a drug store. Opening the letter carefully, Bapuram looked at the address – yes, it was unmistakably addressed to him.

The handwriting appears to be familiar – like that of an old friend one has not met for long. But he was not too sure. He rubbed his eyes and read the address a second time. Some unknown thought like a flash of lightning, passed across his mind and he shivered. Tearing the cover open, he took out the letter carefully like a tender child being brought from the mother's womb. As soon as he opened, he finished reading it, with his

eager eyes, which went through it from the beginning to the end in a flash.

May God Help!

Dibrugarh
21 Kartick

Dear Bora,

Your letters have been duly received. No replies could be sent as no decision on your proposal was taken. Our son has not secured a job as yet. There is no immediate possibility of it also. In the circumstances, how could we think of his marriage now? Considering this aspect of the matter, I request you to look for another boy, for your daughter god will be your help. I am sure your daughter will be married to a worthy person.

We are eager to know about your welfare.

Accept my regards.

Sincerely,

Shri Mahikanta Baruah

As Bapuram was reading the letter, a sense of anxiety and disgust engulfed his face, grasping the handle of the chair with his hand, his lips tightly closed, he started trembling almost uncontrollably. Insult, humiliation and anger combined to rattle his head, as if it was a boiling pot of rice. He did not know where to go or what to do. Unable to decide, he rushed to the house of the mauzadar, letter in hand.

Mauzadar's family played a role in finalising this marriage proposal, and may be, even now, the father and the son could do something to help him out of this situation.

He found Mauzadar sitting in the front room, drawing deep puffs of smoke from the hookah kept nearby. Mauzadar could see something has happened as he noticed Bapuram rushing up, with the letter in hand and said, "Come, what's the matter"?

Bapuram put the letter in mauzadar's hand and sank back into the chair. Having finished reading it and drawing softly from his pipe, mauzadar remarked in a grave voice, "What is there to be so upset?"

"What will happen to my daughter now"? He looked up to Mauzadar for sympathy.

"You have to look elsewhere. If there's a daughter, parents will always like to give her in marriage to a suitable boy – this is the way of the world. Some families keep their word, others do not. What is there to be so aggrieved about? Has it happened only in your case? How can you say it may not turn out for her good, because this proposal has been broken off ?"

Bapuram gave out a long sigh of despair. Mauzadar went on and said marriage was a matter of social responsibility. If the parents, the relatives all were in agreement, then only it could be a happy marriage. If the marriage has taking place solely on the boy's choice, conflicts would soon develop on many occasions amongst the relatives making the girl unhappy.

Moreover, an ordinary man, when lifted to a high position, looks down upon others. A small clerk's son would now become a big officer – how could one keep pace with him? May be, God has ordained your daughter to be married to a person, superior to Kamalakanta. It was all a matter of what was destined to be. There was no use shedding tears over nothing. We were responsible for the action but not the consequence for the Gita says. "To act is only your right, but not to expect to enjoy the fruits of it."

Bapuram sank into the chair like an epilepsy patient. Mauzadar's servant Gerela was sweeping the floor of the house. One, did notice some change in Bapuram's demeanour after his wife died. Gerela now thought him to be suffering from some sudden illness and reported it to mauzadar's wife. Mauzadar's

wife who was shifting bits of popcorn on a dish, quickly covered it and rushed outside. Mauzadar was offering words of consolation to Bapuram quoting from the scripture. Mauzadar narrated the whole thing to his wife now. Bapuram looked up to her, pleadingly with hope:

"Please tell me, where do I give my daughter in marriage now?"

Mauzadar's wife had actually rushed out, keeping her work aside because she was informed that Bapuram was taken ill. But now having found that he fainted only because the daughter's engagement had been broken off, she was really annoyed. Within her heart, she was not reconciled to the idea of Bapuram's daughter being married to a magistrate when her own daughter got married to a school teacher.

Mauzadar's wife spoke in grave tones:

"Of course, it is always difficult to get your girls married if you think of a Munsiff or a Magistrate. But how can all secure a Munsiff or Magistrate or an advocate? But if you seek according to your own position – can you say many girls have remained unmarried?"

"You are right. But the girl herself has been thinking of marrying there only," Bapuram touched his forehead and spoke in despair haltingly.

"Let her think all right but what is so great about it? How many girls get the husband they seek after? Has she been concentrating on him all the tie like Parvati did for Lord Shiva"? Changing her breath, she said : "The girl should be content wherever her parents marry her! Why are you bothering yourself so much? Don't you have a boy near at hand"? Bapuram lifted his head to listen eagerly.

"Why ... Dharani the weaving instructor! Mauzadar's wife looked up to her husband for support. Mauzadar nodded and said

"Yes, we like the boy, Dharani. Quite good looking – of a good caste too. You have also none to call your own. Your daughter and son-in-law will take care of the household."

"What the girl would say," words, very faint, came out of Bapuram's mouth, almost involuntarily.

Mauzadar's wife could hold herself back no longer. "Yes, we also brought up girls but never fixed their marriage after consulting them. The people in the village have seen what you have done by giving much education to your daughter. We are close to you – we did not take notice. We never raised the issue even for a day. Why does Dharani master come so frequently when a young girl is in the house? Is it necessary for Tagar to learn weaving at this stage? I was about to speak out – any way. There will be a scandal if it continues like this for a few days more. That's why I am advising you to give your daughter away in marriage before people start murmuring".

Mauzadar started to draw heavily from his pipe making a kind of croaking sound to drown the words of his wife. Hearing all that was said, Bapuram's face assumed a death-like pallor. Never before did such a chain of unfamiliar thought crowd his mind. Placing his hand on the handle of the chair, Bapuram stood dumbfounded. Many a scene showing Dharani and Tagar together passed before his mind's eye as if on a movie screen and acquired a new meaning. Dharani nursed his wife day and night when she was sick and was about to die. Bapuram showered affection on him since then as if he was his own son : he gave him all the indulgence so that he could mix freely with his daughter. As this relationship began to unravel, layer upon layer in his mind, he touched, it seemed a very delicate and vulnerable spot.

THIRTEEN

Insulted and humiliated, Bapuram came to his house. The winter sun was about to set. Since his wife died, an aunt, a distant relative of his, who had no relatives of her own, was looking after Bapuram's household. Bapuram wanted to speak out everything to her, then and there. He reached the courtyard, had a good look all around but was stunned to see what was going on: where he had put all his trust, he has been betrayed in a cruel way—so it seemed to him. Tagar was working on a flower design on the cloth, her eyes downcast. Dharani was looking at the flower standing close to her. The line separating the two was so thin that their bodies almost touched. Their light-hearted banter was too much for Bapuram's ears and he quickly concluded that the truth in the malicious talk which the people indulged had become crystal clear in the light of what he had seen. Like a curious student of antiquity constructing the picture of a lost civilization on the basis of a few remnants of an old script, Bapuram imagined scenes of intimate relationship between Tagar and Dharani. It was perhaps destined that his daughter's engagement with Kamalakanta should not stand any longer. The

Omniscient Lord praises man, no doubt, but also often looking at his fate, smiles, invisibly, Bapuram thought.

As Dharani was reclining his head downward, his face unconsciously touched Tagar's cheeks, turning her flushed red in her face. Tagar, somewhat perturbed saw her father looking intently in her direction from a distance. She stood up speechless like a statue carved in stone. Her eyes showed deep anguish, crying in fear like a helpless child. Dharani realised the import of what had happened. In a voice, almost inaudible and quivering, he called Tagar and left the place.

Bapuram followed him like a tiger pursuing his prey. As Dharani was about to cross the porch, Bapuram spoke to him as if in a command, "Wait, where are you going? I have things to talk over."

Dragging himself behind, Dharani stood, almost speechless, with eyes downcast before Bapuram. He shivered, it was like an ordeal of fire as all his dignity and sense of self-respect were at stake. He could not even breathe freely. He froze inside and a storm raged on his breast. A sense of uncertainty, bafflement and fear was writ large over his face.

"I never thought you would bring ruin upon us, like this," and his voice hardened, Bapuram continued, "I showered affection on you like my own son. This is how you repaid."

Dharani wanted to sink under the earth overwhelmed by a sense of shame. He began to sweat and he had no strength left to counter the falsehood said about him. Turning his tongue as if by force, he managed to say:

"Your suspicion has no basis."

"What I have seen with my own eyes... you still call it a suspicion only"? He looked at Dharani with a gesture bordering on scorn and sarcasm. "The day you were introduced to us, was not at all a day of good O men," he said.

Dharani was about to cry and said; "You have misunderstood me you are not fair towards me. My relationship with Tagar is innocent, untainted..." He could not continue. Tears rolled down from his eyes.

Touched by pity seeing the helpless look on Dharani's face, Bapuram said with some softness: "To err is human, is it not? But one has to make amends for it. This is where manhood lies."

Dharani rubbing his eyes looked upto Bapuram. "Whatever you have done so long, well you cannot change now. Now you have to marry Tagar. It's sheer luck for you to have someone like Tagar as your wife."

Dharani was stunned, like an accused waiting for a death sentence hearing the word 'acquitted' pronounced by the Judge in Court. A beggar has got all the riches without asking even. Moved by this strange good fortune, Dharani cried for a moment in joy. His eyes, full of apprehension, expressed infinite gratitude and deep solicitude. It was not at all surprising the Dharani should be struck by Tagar's youthfulness, the beauty that unfolded before his eyes, surpassing everything. He did dream of Tagar occasionally with a passionate craving and desire. But where was his capacity to be in love with such a girl, who was the betrothed of a man of far more elevated status and position?

"But without taking Tagar's consent"? Dharani muttered almost unconsciously.

"We still do not go for taking the consent of the bride in our families. I do not see any reason for Tagar to object."

"Kamalakanta has..."

Bapuram, having understood where Dharani's actual apprehension lay, reassured him, "you do not worry about it, at all. I shall marry Tagar to you because both of you like one another. I shall have the marriage fixed this winter itself. I am writing today to inform that I shall not give Tagar in marriage to

Kamalakanta. No, there is no need for my daughter to become the wife of a high official."

Bapuram was scared that Mahikanta's letter might come out tearing the pocket of his open shirt and he clutched at the envelope desperately.

The good reputation of an innocent man is thus blown to pieces by striking against the hard rock of realities.

CHAPTER - II

***How long it takes to be
A daughter-in-law ?***

ONE

Like many in the village Dharani's father, Mohan Bayan lived a contented but hand-to-mouth existence without any complaint. He cultivated land which he inherited from his father, but his own share was very much reduced due to division among several uncles and brothers and yet he managed to have two square meals a day. Villagers always learn to live in contentment, with whatever they have. Assamese cultivators, in particular neither have the strength to reclaim waste lands nor do they have the will and determination to take on the challenge of another profession, which the Brahmin alone seems to possess.

Kalazar had taken a heavy toll in the village. Many died and there was not a single household in the village that had not suffered. Mohan Bayan died when Dharani was only a five-year-old boy. Mohan's widowed wife Ahini had been pulling on somehow since then with the help of her neighbours. Ahini was at least shrewd enough not to forsake their sympathies. The abundant love of his mother made Dharani forget his father's absence. Dharani was quite sharp and showed promise in his studies. He secured scholarship in the primary examination but there was not enough means to see him through the high school. After a few years in the high school, he could not continue his studies and spent two years, practically doing nothing. A Weaving

Institute was started in Guwahati around that time and it offered a scholarship to the deserving students. Dharani applied for the scholarship, secured it and joined the Institute, thus making a departure from the usual practice of the farmer's son becoming a farmer. Neighbours did not like Ahini sending her son far away. The poor widow had dared too much, many thought. Scholarship alone was not sufficient to meet the expenses. Dharani's mother toiled hard to earn the extra money by working on her loom. After two years, Dharani passed out as a qualified instructor and joined the Golaghat Municipal Board as a Weaving Instructor.

Ahini stuck to the ancestral house like a priest clutching on to an old icon. She could not do anything to renovate it. But bamboos were available in their own backyard and the main posts were somewhat intact: the compound too was well fenced and covered. Fruit trees like mango, jackfruit and betelnut surrounded it on the sides hiding the poverty that was inside. None cut trees, they grew in thickness because it was the habit with the villagers to regard the trees as sacred. They also loved living close to nature.

Dharani informed his mother of his engagement without losing much time. Ahini did not mind her son settling down: he was in the right age for marriage. But the fact that Dharani did not consult his kith and kin and also fixed his marriage at a faraway place irked her considerably. If the caste to which the girl belonged was lower, then the family would earn enough of an ill reputation sufficient to last a whole generation. If the worst came to be the worst, the family would face social boycott. So far, Ahini had always surrounded herself with a few precious things inherited by the Bayan family and guarded the family's good reputation against any onslaught. Bayan's household was known to be one of the three important Kalita families who migrated long back from Kamrup. So far they had not established

any marital connection with the new-found Kalitas of Nagaon district. If one of their own clan now took a bride from an ordinary family hailing from upper Assam, it would definitely invite strong criticism. Thinking of this eventuality, Ahini lost her sleep and appetite for several days.

The news spread in the village. Those who bore a grudge against Ahini had a good laugh. Elders did not take to it kindly: they wanted to bring the errant young man back as a punishment and establish their right.

Dharani's family had a long standing feud with Sunod a distant relative over a plot of land, after Mohan died, Sunod actually tried to grab the land but did not succeed. Hearing the news now, Sunod's eyes sparkled with the hidden fire of vengeance. Under the cover of pretence of ascertaining what it was all about, Sunod approached Dharani's mother and asked:

"Dharani's mother, is it true, what we have heard?"

Covering her face by drawing the upper garment partly over it as a mark of respect, Ahini asked suggesting as if she did not understand his question.

"What do you say? What have you really heard? May I know".... Looking at her sharply, Sunod replied:

"Well, you are pretending not to know now. Your son is going to marry a girl of an inferior caste, is it true?"

Ahini now replied that it was not correct and the girl was from a good family.

Sunod laughed derisively and said: "What do you say? I refuse to believe. I have counted the number of good Kalita Kayastha families in upper Assam." Clearing his throat, Sunod spoke in an intimidating tone:

"I have given you a timely warning. Your son has not acted wisely. You will suffer along with your son."

Dharani's mother panicked at the thought of what could happen to them for she knew Sunod too well. Sunod was a past master in spreading scandals about the women of the village. He could now raise a storm over Dharani's marriage and make them miserable. She spoke pleadingly. "He is your son. You should take him back to your fold in any way you like." She almost shed tears in her attitude of complete surrender.

Sunod, about to move, stopped to say, "Yes, now you say our own son. Did you seek my advice on a single occasion? Did you consult when you sent your son to learn weaving? Was it a man's job? Could he not have managed through cultivation? Why did you do something which none in our families did before? With lure of money from your son, you ignored us totally. Now you dig your own grave."

"Could it all have happened if my son listened to me," Ahini entreated. "He does not care a fig for me. But what is the gain in discussing it now? You are my own kith and kin. You can advise me now. If you do not do so, who will? Can anyone leave her son, even if he had done something wrong? I have some twenty rupees with me. Please be kind to send somebody to bring my son back."

Sunod wiped his face with the *gamosa* and said thoughtfully, "Yes, we have to do something. That's why, I have come here in haste as soon as I heard the news. If Mohan's son goes astray when we are alive, everyone will blame us. All right, do come to our house after you have finished your meal. We have to find a way out. May be, we have to take the help of the man from Mayang, who can perform miracles through his craft and send someone to contact him. He must be under an evil spell, otherwise why should he give his consent to this marriage?" Thinking of the strategy to rescue Dharani from those in upper Assam, Sunod walked briskly on his way back home.

Ahini came over to Sunod's house after sometime. She handed over the twenty rupees and entreated further with him to bring her son back. Sunod's tone was slightly changed, now.

"Yes, if he wants to establish a relationship in a good family, why should we stand in the way? But there are very few men of our caste in that area. There were some who accompanied the Bhowanipuria 'Ata' long ago. But where are they now?

I asked the Brahmin on my way to your house. He too was not sure. When is the marriage fixed?"

Dharani's mother handed over the letter, she placed it on the top the betel nut tray very respectfully. Sunod glanced through quickly and said:

"This is what they call as trying to perform the *Ramayana* play without the character of Rama. The girl is from a good family. Yes, yes, but who is the father-in-law? I never heard of a place called Morongi till today. And, it seems, the marriage is fixed on the 18th of the month of Aghon, isn't it?"

Ahini replied: "Yes".

"Time is running out. Today, it is the 10th day. Eight days remain. If we cannot act now, your daughter-in-law will enter your house. Sunod, smiling, had a dig at Ahini."

"Let her come, she will be driven out." Ahini said.

"Your son is far too clever. He has intimated at the last moment so that none can stop it. Be sure, the girl's family is behind all this. They want to upgrade themselves by marrying their daughter into an established Kalita family. The boy earns a good salary – that is also their consideration."

Ahini was happy at the mention of the son's salary. Sunod was sure that he was earning more because he was on a touring job. "They will fleece him dry."

Sunod said.

Ahini became relieved trusting Sunod to do everything to bring her son back. The marriage might not be broken, but she had at least, no fear of being boycotted in the village. Sunod thought that this was the time to do something to strike a deal over that disputed plot of land. He decided to send Monohar to bring Dharani. A friend of Naoram Pandit, the Brahmin, stayed at Golaghat. Monohar would first go there and with his help go to Morongi, break the engagement somehow and bring Dharani back. At least, he would say that mother was ill, whereupon Dharani would quickly return, postponing everything. Twenty rupees, Ahini was told would not be enough to cover the expenses of travel but Sunod agreed to pay the balance in the interest of their family prestige and reputation.

TWO

Monohar was thrilled at the prospect of this visit to upper Assam. So far, he had seen Nagaon town only. That too very briefly during the Puja festival, or when he had been there to purchase yarn from the trader hailing originally from Dacca. His train journey was restricted to that short distance between Roha and Nagaon on a branch line. To travel the whole night was really beyond his imagination. For the last few days, he had been packing clothes and putting them inside the cane suitcase, which had been repaired. A washing shop, a comb and small mirror had to be purchased from the nearby Fulaguri market.

Monohar would be going on next Wednesday. Naoram Pandit had indicated the auspicious time for the journey, which was past 3 P.M. It was quite suitable as the up train used to leave Chapormukh at 6 P.M. arriving Furkating in the early hours of the next morning. There was no train in the afternoon on the branch line from Roha to Chapormukh station. Monohar would therefore go straight to Chapormukh station and take the main train there. If he walked across the rice fields, the distance to the two stations would turn out to be the same.

Naoram Pandit had given a letter to his friend, one Radha Kalita, a teacher. Pandit had requested him to arrange Monohar's

going to Dharani's house. Sunod advised him the whole night about what he should do and shouldn't do. Monohar started on his journey around midday. His brothers and sisters came some distance to see him off and wished him a safe journey.

Both the up and down trains used to stop at Chapormukh station at the same time. Generally, the station was overcrowded at that hour. Sweet and tea vendors used to create a lot of noise. Monohar approached one of the shop owners, a man from the Sylhet district to know about the timing. Monohar was sipping a glass of sweet juice and when he heard the sound of the huge platform bell ringing he tried to leave in a huff thinking that the train was about to leave. "Take it easy. There is still a lot of time," the shopkeeper told him. Monohar purchased some cigarettes; he had a feeling that he had been overcharged for the Red Lamp Cigarettes but his bargaining was of no avail. A pointsman going about in a hurry happened to knock at him at the platform and he was sharply rebuked. As other passengers looked up, Monohar quickly left the scene.

The two trains reached the station at dusk. Passengers rushed in from all directions. There was hell of a noise as if there was some natural calamity. Everyone tried to go on to the front. Monohar took sometime to find out the up train and reach the coach. But when he caught hold of the door handle, the passengers inside shouted:

"There is no space. Move ahead. You could get some in the front," and the door was kept tightly closed. Monohar shuttled back and forth and did not find any accommodation. He even had a tiff with one of the passengers who physically prevented him from entering in saying that it was an interclass compartment.

Train was about to leave. Monohar pleaded with the passengers in a third class compartment to let him go inside but

they were quite adamant. Meanwhile, the train guard blew the whistle and a ticket collector appearing there is if from nowhere pushed Monohar in and closed the door.

Train was moving fast. Kampur, Jamunamukh, Hojai, one after the other, it passed these stations. Monohar started a conversation with the passengers. He asked them about their destinations and told them everything about himself. This was the first time he was off on such a long train journey. He never had any idea about Golaghat town. But he had to go there to stop his cousin from marrying a girl from an inferior caste. Passengers were quite enjoying Monohar's narration of the entire story because it was human nature to find great delight in hearing others' tales of woe. Some of them who got cigarettes to smoke from Monohar became very friendly with him.

Taking a betel nut piece from the passenger sitting near him, Monohar said, "Oh, you are from Hojai. God willing, I shall be coming to you next year, surely."

"Yes. Why not. We will be so happy."

"Quite a few families from our village have moved to Hojai. Of course we have sufficient land and we don't need to go there. Is it true that Khorgeswar has cleared a lot of land there?"

"Who is this Khorgeswar you are referring to?"

"He is from Digholdari side. He moved out last year. There was no immigrant from Mymensingh setting in our village but Khorgeswar brought them there. He sold his land, homestead and all to them and moved to Hojai."

"Yes. We know him. One Khorgeswar is clearing land with the help of these people from Mymensingh there. This is not proper. These Mymensingh people increase their number in no time. It will be difficult to get rid of them later."

"Yes. Yes. You are right. There is no fallow land now on our side. They have occupied every bit of it. It is rumoured that

government would now open the only grazing reserve in the village for their occupation."

"This will, indeed, be ruinous for the village. Where will they keep their cattle? There will be no grass left to feed them."

"Government is interested only in the land revenue. Let the villagers go to hell. The cattle farms are gradually disappearing now as these people from Mymensingh come in."

"How do they settle down on the Laokhwa side? It is always inundated by the Brahmaputra."

The conversation went on. They agreed that the prices of paddy and jute were going up rapidly since these immigrants started to settle there. These outsiders were also getting rich at the expense of the local people.

The train stopped at Lumding junction. Monohar was amazed to see the lighting in the station and in the trains waiting there. A few passengers got down. One or two passengers in the compartment spread their beddings to sleep. Monohar had no intention to sleep. The passengers and the train held all his attention and he kept himself wide awake to observe everything that fascinated him. Meanwhile a few hawkers dropped in and sold their wares to the gullible passengers and Monohar too could not restrain himself.

The train moved in speed across the deepening darkness like some prehistoric demon of great strength, and as it rushed, it produced a wheezing sound. Passengers dozed even as they were engaged in conversation with Monohar. Monohar could only pity them for they fell asleep when they had paid dear money to travel and enjoy all the thrill, it provided. Braving the November cold, Monohar gazed through the window to have a glimpse of the plants and vegetation on both sides amid the deep darkness and silence of the night.

THREE

The train reached Furkating station in the early hours of the morning. Monohar walked to Golaghat and arrived the same morning in the house of Radha Kataki. Radha Kataki, a teacher, knew Dharani, the weaving instructor at Morongi, and on that account, Monohar was very well received. Following the directions given by Kataki, Monohar after a brief rest, set out for Morongi on foot in the afternoon. He reached Morongi around dusk. It was the time when the cowherds were ringing the cows home.

He arrived Dharani's house soon. It was a pleasant surprise for Dharani to see his cousin. At least a close kin had arrived to be present on his wedding, he thought.

He felt a bit sad earlier thinking that none of his relatives would be there to participate. When it came up for discussion in his would-be-in-law's house Dharani did feel cast down – it was a matter of self respect for him as everyone would expect the close relatives to be present on such an auspicious occasion.

Monohar was a straightforward person, not capable of the devious cunning, which Sunod, his father displayed. He could hardly manipulate or falsify things with a certain motive. He at first told Dharani that his mother was ill as he was tutored to

say but after responding to Dharani's detailed enquiries about various things of the village. Monohar came out, although inadvertently with the real purpose of his mission, Monohar told Dharani quite plainly:

"You cannot stay here even for a day more. You have to come back with me tomorrow itself. Your mother is refusing to eat hearing all that you have done. She has told me to break this engagement, anyhow. Is there no suitable girl in our village? You are also marrying much below your caste."

Dharani made light of Monohar's serious charge with a smile. He could understand that falsehood had been spread in the village about Bapuram Bora's actual position and status in society. Everything would be cleared if Monohar stayed on for a few days, he thought. He did not like to argue with Monohar or talk about his impending marriage there and then. He asked Monohar many things about the village. Monohar spoke avidly, not forgetting to mention anything that happened in the village during Dharani's long absence.

Quite a few things had happened in the meanwhile. Dukhi's daughter eloped with a low caste boy whereupon his father left the village in sorrow. The visit of Satradhikar Gosain, and setting up of his camp on the banks of the Kolong river in October last was another event. The villagers staged a bhaona in his honour. But there was resentment when he appointed Purna Medhi as his representative because the man was very arrogant.

Dharani had a deep interest in all these happenings and he heard the details of a village event like a wedding or someone's death with rapt attention.

Monohar fell asleep midway through this narration. Dharani remained awake for a long time. He reflected on the turn that his life had taken. His life was carefree so far. But then, why did he allow himself to be entrapped? Should he run away

from this in order to retain his freedom now! He felt as if he could act before the night broke into a dawn.

Monohar, now well dressed with fine clothes lent by Dharani was looking for some opportunity to go out that morning and look up things for himself. His first was to visit Bapuram Bora's house and break the news that the wedding would not take place. Taking advantage of Dharani's absence for a while Monohar set out on his mission. Soon he reached the porch in front of Bapuram's house. He had a good view of the house from a distance. There was a wide open front yard and a spacious compound. The plinth had a concrete floor and the walls of the house were whitewashed. It could easily be the house of a respectable government clerk or an advocate. Monohar realised that Bapuram Bora was an important man of the village. Only if the caste was same, one would reckon, Dharani could not have done better than marrying in such a family. With some hesitation, Monohar entered the compound.

Bapuram Bora was sitting in the front side room, quite relaxed, smoking his hookah. He looked up seeing a stranger coming in. Monohar went forward with quick steps and introduced himself: "I am Dharani's brother."

Removing the pipe, Bapuram Bora stretched forward to welcome Monohar and asked him to sit. He made enquiries about his arrival with so much warmth and affection that Monohar was put completely at ease. It was as if they had known each other for long. Moved as he was, Monohar could not bring up the matter of breaking the wedding engagement. However, he sensed trouble if he did not broach the topic at all and after a good deal of talking in a roundabout way, he came to the point slowly. "Dharani had created some problem by not conveying the news in time," Monohar said.

Very much surprised, Bapuram raised his head and asked, "What do you mean?"

"As you know our family has always had a high reputation. They are a bit apprehensive, Monohar said.

"You father then has not given his consent" Bapuram got a little worried and said "it seems we may have to break the engagement."

Having seen Bapuram's financial soundness Monohar was so long thinking of a smooth conduct of the wedding. Apprehending that his own foolishness could now break the marriage, Monohar hastened to say "why should you break the marriage, already fixed? Father is the head of our clan. It will not take time to convince him."

"Suppose they excommunicate them," Bapuram asked trying to test Monohar.

"No, no, you need not at all worry," Monohar restored him. "Your daughter", will go to a family of high reputation. By God's grace, Dharani's family is quite well-to-do. Your daughter will not suffer from any want or privation. You need not worry."

Bapuram could guess that his daughter's future would be assured if Sunod could be pleased. Bapuram thought of sending gift clothes and some twenty rupees as a token of regard to him.

Monohar was about to take leave. He was then invited for light refreshment inside in the traditional way. Having been given all the respect and consideration to which he was entitled as a close relative of the bridegroom, Monohar was pleased.

He thought on the way. Dharani is marrying in a respectable family – he is rather lucky. Why should I break the relationship?

FOUR

Dharani had already made arrangement to take the bride home after the wedding. Monohar now insisted on going with them. Dharani had also secured three month's leave without pay. He dispatched a telegram to Monohar's father informing him that they would be starting off for the village on the day after the wedding.

Bapuram Bora decided to go after the marriage on a pilgrimage. Bapuram who was deeply wounded by his daughter falling in love with someone of no known social standing against the dictates of ethics or the wishes of her father had no attachment left for his home. Bapuram thought that there girls were not refined enough in their tastes nor upright in their preference and that physical attraction was the overriding concern that guided them at every step. Religion, education or the reading of scriptures kept this craving at check only for a short while. Bapuram decided not to keep any contact with his daughter in future. All the articles which she could take from the parent's house were handed over to her two days before the marriage.

On the fourth day, the bride's party reached Roha Railway Station Sunod received the telegram sent earlier by Dharani in

proper time but did not do anything to provide a cart to take them from the Railway Station to the village. On the other hand, he was annoyed having come to know that Monohar was accompanying Dharani, who had already lowered their caste status. Sunod was determined to teach his son a lesson as soon as he arrived back in the village.

Dharani's mother somehow managed to send Bhedela's bullock cart with the help of neighbours to the Railway Station to take them home. The very fact of her son coming home with a new bride was enough to lessen her wounded pride or her pain. Motherly affection got the better of her resentment and indeed washed her heart clean. Had Dharani's father been alive, she thought, there would have been so much of celebration. The news of the arrival of the bride and bridegroom made Ahini quite restive. At times, she cleansed the house in sheer delight but she also wept giving vent to a hidden sense of wrong from resentment against his son. But she did everything to rearrange things in the house and keep the room clean and well-trimmed for the occupation of her son and daughter-in-law. She had fresh betelnuts brought in and two small banana plants planted on the porch for their customary reception and welcome. Various items of food, tea, sugar, salt and fresh vegetables were brought from the market on the previous day. Ahini asked Keho's mother to supply the milk in exchange of the paddy given to her.

As the bride and the bridegroom entered the portals of the house, Ahini wondered if she should call in the close relatives to welcome them there. Many of them had spoken sarcastically of Dharani's marriage or rather of his reported elopement with a girl of lower caste. If she invited them now, they might hit back. If she didn't they would take it as an omission and find fault with her. The daughter-in-law had brought so much dowry, they would say, that Ahini could not care less for them now.

Monohar came in advance of the party. As soon as he reached, the women made a beeline to Dharani's house. They made preparation to receive the bride and the bridegroom without waiting for Dharani's invitation. For the moment, they forgot Dharani's transgression in the matter of following the family tradition. Children gave a shout as they saw the cart at a distance. Some of them sneaked in to have a good look at the bride. Tagar, deeply embarrassed by all this attention, covered her face. Boys made fun of this and shouted, "Come, come, look at the shy princess," and everyone had a hearty laugh. Another pushed his way up to the cart and said, "Oh, this one is too fat, and therefore too shy" and hearing this, Tagar almost fainted.

Being teased thus, Tagar had tears in her eyes. But she behaved with restraint and arranged her bridal dress from time to time as carefully as she could. It was a wintry day but still she was sweating.

The cart arrived at Dharani's house there were banana plants and mango leaves were hung as part of the auspicious ceremony. There was an improvised wooden platform, a brass water jar and the women were singing and waiting expectantly a little behind. Dharani did not pay any heed to the boys' antics thinking that it was part of it all and would on pass over. But it was not to be. Dharani knew that the auspicious ceremony would be followed by many inauspicious comments and he wanted to escape from all this and, therefore, entered the house without observing all the formalities enjoined in the elaborate ritual. But a distant aunt of his shouted from behind, "Wait, wait, my dear! You have already violated the custom by the manner of your marriage. Please observe the minimum now when the bride is setting foot on the house for the first time." Dharani was quite taken aback. He went back to the wooden platform and sat in a proper posture of a bridegroom. His aunt rebuked the girls, who

were engaged in animated conversation and said, "Go, Go, now take the bride near to the banana plants and make her stand there."

Before Dharani's aunt could finish speaking three of the girls went up to the cart and helped Tagar get down from it. Rearranging her dress they made her stand up to the left of Dharani. As the women started to sing the marriage song, Dharani's aunt shouted to the maid to bring the tray with the earthen lamp, which was then turned on the faces of the bride and the bridegroom three times over. Patani, the maid, washed their feet. Dharani put a coin on the tray. The bride and the bridegroom were then welcomed by the womenfolk.

Dharani's mother did not have the chance to do anything during the ceremony. The women did everything for her. When the time came for the couple to fall prostrate at her feet, the women looked for her. Ahini could hardly check her tears as she blessed the couple. She guided the bride and introduced her to the elderly relatives. Tagar paid her respects to Dharani's aunt in the same manner as she did to her mother-in-law earlier. One of these relatives was very distantly related: but Tagar showed the same kind of respect to her as guided by her mother-in-law and this was far beyond the expectation of the woman herself. She blessed Tagar profusely saying that it was not necessary at all.

In the gathering Dharani's mother spotted another woman, a distant relative, a few steps away and remarked : "Why do you remain aloof, dear? Please give your blessings to the girl" and then, she dragged Tagar in her direction. Tagar's dress for the occasion did not help her to move freely and she could not keep pace with the mother-in-law. Ahini was quite annoyed; she thought that Tagar was holding herself back for some reason. Ahini knew very well that these relatives did not take kindly to

Dharani's marriage as the bride hailed from a faraway place. They would look for every opportunity to spread malicious gossip about her daughter-in-law. Being sharply rebuked by Ahini, Tagar moved forward slowly. The woman came up to her and fondled her in a show of affection.

By the time, this ritual of paying respects to the elder relatives was over, it was about noon. Women of the neighbourhood left one by one as each had her daily chores to perform in the house. The advent of the bride made them forget the daily drudgery common to all our women in any village, but it could not be so for long.

It took a few passing moments for the new to become old and for each one of these women to return to her familiar nooks like cows coming back to their calves at the end of a weary day.

FIVE

Pavoi, wife of Ketehu came to the riverbank to fetch water later than at her usual time as she had been to Ahini's house to see her daughter-in-law. It was nearing sunset. She met Naduki on the way to the ghat. She had already filled her pitcher to the brim and was walking up, slowly. Having noticed Pavoi there, she asked, "Well, did you go to see Ahini's daughter-in-law?"

"Yes," Pavoi replied and was rubbing the pitcher clean while talking.

"How is she?"

"Yes. Good looking. But not slim at all."

"Not at all of a good shape, her body. It seems."

"How do you know? Did you see yourself?"

"Why should I see? Don't I have my ears?" Naduki fumed.

It was in Naduki's nature to speak ill of others at every opportunity. Pavoi would have chastised her at another time, but it was already getting late. She had to bring the cows home, light the lamp and do some cleaning which she could not do during the day. Unless everything was finished in time before it was dark, it could be quite difficult with the children around. She remained quiet not keen to join issues with Naduki on this point. The woman, however, was not content to let it go. Naduki spoke

harshly implying that Pavoi was hiding the truth in her own interest and confided her suspicion to two other women of the village, Pamila and Thupi, who too were coming to the river ghat at that time.

Dharani's wife was no good looking woman and that was that, Pavoi wasn't speaking the truth. "You cannot keep fire under a cover for long," Naduki said with a note of finality.

Pamila and Thupi did not go to see the bride: they were both busy with their looms till evening. Much gossip was already spread in the village about Dharani's wife. Pamila put the pitcher on the ground, chewed a betelnut piece and asked, "Is it true that Dharani has brought a bride from a low caste?"

Finding someone in tune with her, Naduki said, "Yes. That's as clear as daylight. They are trying to give out that she is from a Kalita family but who will believe? Actually, she is from a low caste."

Chewing the betelnut with renewed vigour, Pamila continued.

"Should he do like this being a member of the Bayan's family? Should he have brought such a woman?"

Naduki could not be stopped now from slandering the new bride in her own way. Putting the pitcher down and sitting on the ground raising one leg on the other, Naduki said, "How can he not marry? There was quite a murmur even before the marriage. Girl's father forced him to marry her."

Pamila now spoke in a hushed voice after clearing her mouth and spitting out the betelnut juice on the ground.

"Is she already carrying?" Pamila asked.

Naduki seeing another woman go down along the river ghat to bring water whispered into Pamila's ears, "What do you ask? It was already aborted once, they say. That's why the father was quite desperate to give her in marriage."

Pamila now shrank back in a deep sense of revulsion. Both of them got up to go. They came down by the steep river bank. Naduki had great satisfaction being able to bring the talk to a happy consummation. She was waiting eagerly for sometime to have the company of Pamila on her way back from the river.

Inner character of a man or woman is so much of a mystery that people always take recourse to constructing it in accordance with their imagination, preference or liking. And of course, there is always a special delight in discussing or dilating upon the hidden side of anyone's character.

Gossip soon spread in the village. Villagers derived from it an impression about Tagar's character, which was not to be erased later.

SIX

During the two months of winter, hardly anyone would be found staying indoors: almost all the villagers were out working in their fields. They used to go early in the morning everyday, snatching at times a hurried meal. Women not only carried their sickles in hand: they also carried the food in the form of some home made cakes, powdered rice, beside some fruits and the betelnuts required for the day. Children used to carry plates and jars containing drinking water.

Some women, who would carry babies in arms used to keep them on improvised cots placed on the high land in between the paddy fields, spreading above them a thin piece of cloth like a canopy. The tribal women preferred to have the babies on their backs when they worked. Their clothes often got drenched by the early morning dew in the fields. As the sun rose, the entire fields got filled up with their lively talk, the sound of the sickles at work in fine rhythmic motion in every corner.

At noon, all of them gathered at the centre of the field and sat there, some drinking water straight from the jar while others shared a meal. But there was no time for leisure and soon they got back to work again. As soon as it was sunset, women seemed to be hurrying home. Men took the bundles of paddy on their shoulders, women too had one stack each, placed on top of the

head. As they walked briskly paddy stacks made a sound like the humming of a tune so agreeable to the ears of the toilers in the fields. Bits of golden corn were strewn on the path as they returned home.

Sunod had placed some of the bundles on the threshing floor. They were good and well-grown for raising seedlings for transplantation in due course. Monohar with his younger brother Saroodhan was helping their father in this work. Soon their neighbour Bihbor joined Sunod on the floor.

"You seem to be threshing too few bundles of paddy today. What's the reason?" Bihbor asked.

"Yes. Only ten. These are for seedlings. Good seedlings mean everything—don't you think so?"

Kolimon and Maghi, who watched closely, came nearer.

"What is this paddy, you are threshing," Kolimon asked Monohar.

"It is a special type of Sali," Monohar replied.

There were soon discussing details of paddy harvest, the exact number of the women they had engaged for reaping the paddy and the prospect of good harvest. Sunod changed the topic. "I have enough for the year, more or less, God willing, I am thinking of fixing Monohar's marriage. It should suffice," he said: "Yes. He is old enough for marriage now," Kolimon replied in support.

They were smoking from the hookah and taking his face a little away from them, Bihbor said, "Yes. You have broached the right subject. But what have you done about Dharani? Our community should have decided on some course of action."

Kolimon added quickly. "Let the field work be over, we will have to do something". Looking at Sunod, he continued, "You cannot spare him because he is your cousin. You are a leading

man. You cannot ignore your duties out of affection for your kin. What do you say?"

Bihbor replied on Sunod's behalf, "Have you ever seen Monohar's father hesitate to carry out his social obligations? Think of Lahon's daughter-in-law, was she not his close relative?"

Maghi nodded and said, "Yes. Yes, it is true."

"Think of that. He pressed them so much on our behalf then, did he ever spare them? No. Full twenty rupees, he realized from them on behalf of the community then."

Throwing bits of firewood to the fireside Sunod said, "How can you think of leniency in consideration when it comes to judgement by the society? It is the same as in the Court. I shall have Dharani punished if he has done wrong. No... I shall not spare even if it is Monohar, my son, when he has done something to offend."

Sunod's face lit up like flame for a moment, showing his sense of pride. Maghi stood up to help Monohar on the threshing floor. Monohar now relieved sat down near the fireside to feel the warmth with his hands. Bihbor now asked him about the family of Dharani's father-in-law.

Ever since he arrived Monohar had been saying all good things about Dharani's father-in-law and his family even without anyone asking him about them. There was no stopping him on this topic. Monohar said that Bapuram Bora belonged to a good and respectable Kalita family. Many good Brahmins attended the marriage. Quite a few lawyers and other dignitaries of the town also came. Bapuram was a highly respected and influential person of the Morongi region. Bapuram had several goods offers for his daughter but he did not wish to give her in marriage except to a highly respectable family. That's why he agreed to marry her to the Bayan family. While talking of the prosperity of Bapuram Bora, he did not forget to mention that he had sent some amount

to them as a mark of his respect to the village gentry. Amazed at the stupidity of his son and fearing that the money would now slip away from his hands, Sunod joined in with a forced smile, "Oh, you fool! That was meant to be offered in the Namghar at the altar only."

Kolimon and Bihbor sitting near the fireside exchanged quick glances hearing what Sunod said. Sunod cunning as a fox did notice this. He was apprehensive that his son might speak more about the presents in the form of clothes and in order to reinforce his earlier statement he said, "I have to send the clothes too along with the money to the *Namghar* after the Bihu festival."

Bihbor waited a bit and then said, "He seems to be a very religious person."

Once the topic got changed, Sunod continued, "They are lucky, aren't they? The four Satras are in upper Assam, they are living in constant companionship with the saint and other Vaishnavas there."

Sunod sighed sadly and said, "we are sinful creatures. I could not visit the four Satras even once. I was about to go there at the time of the Rasa festival once but Monohar's mother fell ill – and I didn't go. The fact is, Bihbor, the world is too much with us, we have no time to think of God – we have forgotten the real thing."

Kolimon knew that once Sunod started to speak on this subject, he would not stop. He got up to go, saying, "It is already getting late. I am to go now. Is the threshing over by now?"

Kolimon thought on the way: "Sunod has now made an about turn now. Dharani's matter seems to have been forgotten." Bihbor wanted to go now. As soon as Kolimon left Sunod remarked, "Kolimon has no faith. How can he be saved?" After this, Bihbor had to stay on for sometime more.

Threshing was over. Maghi and Monohar again came to sit near the fireside. Saroodhan went to the kitchen. Bihbor said, "Oh, I have got the old pain now. I carried a heavy load today."

Monohar went to him and giving him some medicine, he said, "Brother, take this ointment, you will be all right tomorrow." It was a medicine he collected from a person in the train while he was going to bring Dharani. Sunod was not happy at his son giving it away to Bihbor. Bihbor wanted to go as quickly as he could. Looking towards Maghi he said, "Aren't you coming?"

"Yes, yes, why not? Let us go."

They soon left in the darkness.

SEVEN

Neighbours kept on calling in their house and visiting them from the day the bride and the bridegroom reached the house. Tagar was often at a loss to receive them in the best way not knowing their actual status in the family or in the social hierarchy. Her mother-in-law reprimanded her at times on this account.

Dharmeswar Gosain had no less than forty disciples residing with their families in the Topakusi village. From the side of his wife he had a close connection with the well-known Mahmora Satra. As a result, he had become a little proud, even vain to some extent. Gosain had practically stopped visiting the families even on a festive occasion. A bride coming from Upper Assam was quite an unusual event in the village. The lady Gosain was all the time curious and was itching to come to Bayan's house. As the Gosain had gone to a far-off village, the lady accompanied by her maid came to Dharani's house that evening. Ahini was almost overwhelmed by the occasion: she did not know what to do and called Tagar loudly, "What are you doing inside? Why don't you bring the new mat for the venerable lady to sit on?"

Tagar came out hurriedly with the mat. But she tumbled for a moment not being able to decide whether to place the mat

inside or in the courtyard. Her mother-in-law lost her patience and rebuked Tagar, "What the hell you are trying to do now? Why don't you wipe the floor clean with your hands, before placing the mat?"

The lady hesitated to sit for she was not sure if the mat was free of impurities and said, "No need. I shall have no time to wait longer. I have been going on this road since I was a child. I came over just to have a look at our daughter-in-law."

Before she could finish Ahini paid respects to her by lying prostrate at her feet and pleaded, "It is our good fortune today, mother has herself come to bless us."

"Please get up, do bring your daughter-in-law to our house."

Tagar placed the mat and went inside to bring the betelnut tray. Dharani's mother looked sideways and shouted, "Why are you taking so long? Why don't you bring the betel tray and show your respect by falling at her feet? Did not your mother teach you to show respect to the elders?"

The lady spoke gravely, "The girl got married late. She would not like your control. He is your only son, you should keep your daughter-in-law fully under your control."

Tagar knelt down and offered betel to the lady. Her mother-in-law too bowed. A silver coin was glittering atop the tray. The lady reclined a bit to take it and said, "Get up. Get up. God be with you."

As both the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law lifted their heads and got up, the lady addressed Tagar, "It is your good fortune that you are now a daughter-in-law in Bayan's family. The family was so prosperous at one time. Let those days return again, that's what I am praying to God. Be obedient to your mother-in-law. So long your mother-in-law was keeping the family candle burning through thick and thin. Now, it is your turn."

After sometime she looked towards Dharani's mother and said, "Let me go now. Please do not mind. I have to go without finishing, the betel for I can't wait any longer."

Dharani's mother said with all the respect that she could command, "We are so lucky, we are privileged to have the dust of your feet today." Then she bowed a second time.

The lady instructed the maid to hurry up as it was already time to light the lamp at the prayer house and proceeded. "Gosain must be waiting for us," she said.

"You kindly go ahead," said the maid and falling a little behind picked up the betel and the leaf from the tray quietly.

EIGHT

Tagar did hear a lot about herself from those who came to see her. Some of the women did not shrink from lashing her with their tongues on her very face, others more vain pointed her many shortcomings to her mother-in-law in her hearing. Still some others carried tales to the neighbours, which magnified a hundredfold reached Tagar's ears in no time.

Bihbor's daughter Jetuki came from Haldia to visit her home and when they came to take her to her husband's house, she pretended to be ill and on a couple of occasions deferred her going. It was her habit to roam around in the neighbourhood carrying tales from one house to the other and she used to come regularly for gossip during noon time.

Tagar had just finished washing after the midday meal and she was changing after bath. She had put the *riha* on, her body, still a little wet and was combing her hair. Jetuki came at that moment and opened her chatter box.

Touching Tagar's earrings, she observed, "The gems are so dull in colour. I heard your father is very rich. Did he not get better gems for your earrings?" Tagar, greatly peeved almost forcibly came away, pushing Jetuki's hand.

"Oh, she does not like to speak to me even," shouted Jetuki and having failed to evoke any response, she tried to be satirical:

On Your Riha
 The lotus blossoms,
 You have made a dome
 Offather's wealth
 And your words
 Cost thousand rupees.

Tagar gave a shrug and said, "Why do you go on repeating the same proverb everyday? Tell me, what do you want?"

"When are you going to give me the *mehkela* of muga silk which you promised?"

"When did I promise? Do I have so many pairs to give you one?"

"Did you not promise to give it the day before yesterday?"

Tagar denied having made any such promise, and was just about to put a fresh vermillion mark on her forehead after her bath, when Jetuki came near and recited an old saying:

Like leeches on a rainy day
Those who are from the upper region
Break the promises they make.

"Did you not tell that you will give me by asking brother to spare?"

"Did I promise to ask him or told you to take it by telling him yourself? Look, here, he is coming right now, get not one pair but three if you like."

After putting the mark on her forehead Tagar came to her mother-in-law to take a betelnut piece from her tray leaving Jetuki behind.

Her mother-in-law did not have the habit of taking a nap after lunch but she began to indulge in this luxury after the coming of her daughter-in-law. Tagar sitting by her side just finished taking the betel piece when Jetuki came there.

"Oh, you want to take the betelnut all alone," she said.

Her mother-in-law was not yet asleep. She was keeping a sharp eye on her daughter-in-law all the time. Hearing what Jetuki had said, she rebuked Tagar, "Don't put everything in your mouth, give Jetuki also one piece." Tagar had already given it to Jetuki. Chewing the betel piece, Jetuki bent down to take a bit of lime to go with it observing the vermillion spot on the forehead she spoke as if she was greatly shocked:

"Oh, god! Your mark is so small. Should it be so? Is there any shortage of vermillion in the house? If you had asked Dharani brother he would certainly have brought it from Chadmal's shop. What would the people say if they find the new bride with so small a mark on her forehead? Our sister-in-law is just sticking to her old manners inherited from her native place."

Jetuki looked towards Dharani's mother who was sleeping on the bed for her reaction. She was already trying to find some excuse to find fault with Tagar. When she heard Jetuki now she raised her head flaring up in a sudden flash of anger and said: "Why don't you give her a good thrashing and teach her? She would have been a mother of three to four children had she been married in time. She pretends not to know how to put the vermillion mark on her forehead? Do you want to take another husband?"

Tagar came to her mother-in-law to get away from the sharp words of Jetuki but being now harshly chastised by her mother-in-law which she did not deserve at all, she shed a silent tear. Seeing her go out with tears in her eyes, Ahini looked towards Jetuki and said, "See this rich man's daughter, see her temper! Did I say anything so offensive to her to make her retire to her room in this manner?"

Wanting to please Dharani's mother, she searched her flowing hair for lice. For a long time both the women kept on

talking about the faults and shortcomings of Tagar.

That afternoon Tagar was expected to go with her mother-in-law to visit some neighbours and she was asked by her mother-in-law to dress up and get ready. Tagar took out a pair of finely embroidered silk clothing which was artfully designed and woven by her late mother in her own loom. As the memory of her mother rushed back, she could hardly restrain her tears. Tagar stood before the mirror in her new and beautiful clothes: her youthful charm in full display, she appeared transformed. Standing before the mirror, she covered her bosom with the end of her thin upper garment, taking the other piece over her head, drawing it partly over her face like a veil. She was enraptured by her own beautiful look for a moment. Like a tree beginning to flower in the spring season a smile came over her face. She started looking towards the door as if some one would call her. She wished Dharani would come and see her in that dress. It was but the natural desire of every young woman to appear in her best finery before her husband. This did not normally happen in the village. Actually the couple remained separated from one another throughout the day like a pair of swans meeting only at night. Occasionally some young man would brave into the bed room at any time of the day to gossip or exchange pleasantries with his wife but all were not as light-hearted. Moreover, the daughter-in-law would be showered with abuses if any such transgression came to the notice of the elders.

Dressed in her usual cotton pair of clothes, her mekhela flowing downward, just a little beyond the knees only, her mother-in-law was waiting for Tagar. When her daughter-in-law was still not coming out Ahini got impatient and shouted, "How long do you take to dress up? Are you dressing up like a bride?" Hearing her shout, Tagar had another look at her dress and drawing the upper garment slightly longer over her head, she came out: the

finely woven clothes, perfectly matched made her beautiful. Ahini was greatly surprised to see Tagar put on such an expensive dress. The thought of their own abject poverty came to her mind. She concluded that her daughter-in-law wanted to ridicule them by showing up her better position. The moment the thought came to her mind she looked towards Tagar sternly and said, "You a butterfly, where do you want to go displaying such colour and finery and whom do you want to take as a husband now?"

Tagar's face changed colour instantly, at the harsh admonition from her mother-in-law, like a dark cloud suddenly covering the bright morning sun.

mother-in-law more jealous of her. She was afraid that her son who married without her consent might be made hostile and intolerant of her because of what he had received in marriage. She was afraid in case – because of the boy marrying the girl of her choice – her entire attention would be like an obedient sunflower looking on her dear husband alone.

Because of these thoughts in her mind Ahini liked to exercise strong control on her daughter-in-law. But as it happened, the more she tried to have control over her, the real authority was gradually passing on to her daughter-in-law, almost unknowingly. For small help neighbours would always come to Tagar and not to Ahini. She would never send back anybody empty-handed. If Dharani wanted to bring anything from the market he would ask Tagar. Anything brought from the market, he would hand over to Tagar.

Pavoi asked for a gift of a cotton shawl the day after Tagar arrived. Tagar did not refuse as being new bride in the family she was hardly in a position to do so. But since Tagar was too busy attending to the guests hereafter Pavoi could not press her to somehow give the gift. She found how both the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law sat down for a gossip after the midday meal. Pavoi asked Dharani's mother for a betelnut piece and sat down by her side. As soon as Pavoi sat there, Tagar went inside. Pavoi was looking for an opportunity to excuse herself and go inside. But Ahini talking constantly did not give her the scope to do so. Seizing an opportunity at last, she got up and came over to Tagar's room. Her mother-in-law could guess that Pavoi's intention was to extract something from Tagar and accordingly she kept a sharp eye looking in from the courtyard. Tagar searched her suitcase for some old garments, but all in vain; She finally gave a new but somewhat coarser piece to her. Pavoi, all smiles, took it neatly under wraps and came out trying to conceal it from

NINE

Daily routine of Dharani's mother changed from the day her daughter-in-law arrived. Tagar took over most of her household work, like sweeping the courtyard or carrying water from the tank. She never failed to attend to the needs of her mother-in-law at any time. For anything, she was not required to be told twice. Within a short time Tagar could realise what was her part of the work in the house. Except for cooking in the kitchen, other work had to be performed by her. In the kitchen too she would do everything from washing rice to making the vegetables ready for her mother-in-law to put in the oven. She would sit by the side of her old mother-in-law at mealtime to take special care and offer her the betel tray as soon as she had done with eating. In the night she always retired only after wishing her and informing her.

But in spite of doing all these she could never please her mother-in-law. In the beginning it was natural for her to get annoyed from time to time because she was not too sure about the caste that Tagar's family belonged to. But when she came to know the facts she had no reason to nourish any grievance. Moreover, Tagar's father had sent with her a precious dowry, a good many articles and furniture, something the Bayan's family never had for several generations. But those articles made the

Ahini. But as luck would have it, Pavoi's joy made her a little careless and somehow the neatly wrapped bundle fell off her hand on the floor. Dharani's mother quickly intervened, "What have you got there under your arm?"

Pavoi retrieved it immediately and putting it under her arm back again answered, "Your daughter-in-law has given a tattered piece on my request; I have nothing better to put on these days." But this time she did not sit down near the old woman but left in a hurry. Ahini lost her temper not at Pavoi's cunning but more on account of her daughter-in-law's benevolence which made her indulge in reckless charity and dole out gifts to Pavoi even without mentioning it to her mother-in-law. "You stupid woman, do you want to clothe the naked world on your own? You have brought ruin on your own house. You have caused your mother's death, your father has become an exile on account of you. You have descended like a bad omen on our house. Do you want to show off your father's wealth? At this rate you would become pauper in no time. I was here all the time and she did not think it fit to ask me even! Is Pavoi your kith and kin that you are so intimate with her? Let my son come today. I shall teach you a lesson. You deserve a good thrashing."

Ahini went on and on in this vein till she got tried. And through her torrential abuse, she tried to get back her old authority.

TEN

Not at all satisfied over exercising strict control over her daughter-in-law, Ahini started reporting her shortcomings to her son. It was no longer possible to meet him often. Before he got married Dharani used to sleep by his mother's side and on a hot summer night he would hardly close his eyes unless his mother held the handfan, waved it to create a cool air or scratched his back. He could hardly finish his midday meal without his mother being near and talking to him. But after her daughter-in-law came to the house, Dharani began to keep himself aloof. Not to speak of seeking her advice on household matters he ignored any sound advice given by her.

Dharani in the old days always consulted his mother even if he wanted to buy a small fish but now he acted differently. He would straightaway purchase a cow from Bhagirath for six rupees without the knowledge of his mother. And when he brought it home he would hand it over not to her as he would have done had his wife not been there. He would take the cow straight to his wife and ask her to bring some saline water and then speak to her with a smile, "Do you know to milk the cow? Now it will be for you to look after the cowshed."

Dharani did this because he did not like to give his old mother an extra burden. Ahini thought, "He has not brought it

for me, then why should he ask me. His wife has now become everything for him." Ahini was deeply dissatisfied.

On that day she took to bed very early on the pretext of illness. She was thinking all the time of the injustice done to her by her son and daughter-in-law, she could not sleep the whole night. As days passed her discontentment grew. When she could not find remedy through her constant reporting against her daughter-in-law to her son, she developed an attitude of hostility towards her own son for being a henpecked husband. If he talked to her about anything, she started to speak harshly in return.

It was the same even during mealtime. Earlier the mother took a lot of care of her son in this respect. Dharani suffered from stomach ailments as a child: his mother always kept this in mind always cooking what suited him most. The position had become quite the reverse now as she would not take much care of the food and cooked whatever she wished. Sometimes she forgot to add salt to the curry and made a pretence of not caring for anything at all.

Dharani never made an issue of it at any time: if he liked he ate more with obvious relish, otherwise not. Sensing his nonchalant attitude his mother would, at times, remark, "Why should you like my cooking now? I am always telling your wife to do the cooking. It is already six months since she came. How long do you propose to keep her as a bride? Let her cook for you, separately. If I can manage, I shall cook for myself whenever I can, otherwise I shall go without food. How long am I supposed to go on with this drudgery for your sake?" Hearing all this from her mother-in-law Tagar that day ate avidly, even though the food was indeed tasteless.

Tagar collected some fresh vegetables as Dharani was not at all eating well for several days at a stretch and kept it near

the kitchen. Her mother-in-law remarked, "Where is the maid to cook all this stuff for you? Why don't you have a separate kitchen if you are so greedy? I am old, I cannot sit for long by the fireside."

The daughter-in-law quickly came away from there in silent trepidation. The vegetables she picked from the backyard were thrown away like waste.

ELEVEN

When her son remained unmoved despite her constantly reporting against her daughter-in-law, the Ahini started to carry tales to her neighbours defaming Tagar. Any visitor coming on a casual visit could not leave without having a fair share of these tales. "The daughter-in-law could not care less for her mother-in-law. She is constantly quarreling with her. Both the husband and the wife have conspired to make her miserable. They even eat together secretly depriving the old woman", and so on.

Tagar was sweeping the courtyard when the broom stick accidentally touched Ahini's feet as she was standing near. She made a scene blaming Tagar for deliberately ill-treating her. She even refused to take her food. It took Tagar full two days to plead with her and make her change her decision. Such instances were many.

It was now the month of *Chaitra*. The Bihu festival was not far away. Tagar was boiling paddy on a pot as directed by her mother-in-law. She was fatigued sitting near the fire under a hot sun. She took pieces of firewood on her hand and tried to find out if the paddy had been ready. When she could not decide herself she politely asked her mother-in-law whereupon she flared up and abused Tagar for not knowing what every girl knew.

She blamed her for over-boiling it. She even took a dig at her family background.

Tagar was near the fireside throughout the whole day. The sun was all the time on her head. She was sweating all over and was thirsty too. She did not have the courage to go inside to drink some water. She felt dizzy after sometime. As she tried to move in the direction of her room she could no longer stand. She fell down unconscious on the floor.

Just at that moment Jetuki was reaching the courtyard of Dharani's house on some errand. She saw the paddy spread there for drying in the sun being grazed on by a cow. Jetuki raised an alarm.

Ahini rushed out hearing her cries. Hearing the deafening noise the cow stopped and ran out of the place. In the meantime Jetuki enquired if Tagar was in. Ahini shouted back blaming Tagar squarely for her negligence in not taking proper care and preferring to rest in her room.

Not able to stand the sun both Ahini and Jetuki came near the kitchen and was waiting for Tagar to come out and when there was no response to Ahini's repeatedly calling on her to come out. Jetuki concluded that Tagar must be sound asleep.

Jetuki's comment added fuel to the fire of Ahini's anger, she said, "Go and drag her out of her room by the hair, for whom is this fairy princess weaving yarn in her bedroom ?"

When Jetuki and his mother were thus talking to each other Dharani entered the house. He thought something was surely wrong. Seeing Dharani, Jetuki said, "Oh you have come at the right time."

"What has happened," Dharani asked.

"Your wife has taken to bed," Jetuki said.

"Is she ill or what ?"

Seeing that Dharani was very concerned, Ahini could not hold herself back and said, "Go immediately. Your wife must be very sick ! You have to nurse her back to health."

Dharani was already ruffled as he had an altercation with a few villagers over a land dispute and his temper snapped. "Both of you have combined to torture her," he shouted in anger.

Ahini was not prepared for such harsh words, that too a direct accusation from her own son. Dharani blamed her for asking Tagar to boil paddy sitting near the fire on such a hot day under the scorching sun. Ahini began to wail bitterly for the miseries inflicted on her since her daughter-in-law came to the house. She decided on the spur of the moment to leave her house then and there and asked Jetuki to give her shelter in her own house. Jetuki had actually come there to take some salt. She had no intention of lingering on, more so now that the situation had taken such a turn. She herself had come to her house on a short visit and had to put up with much humiliation since she had been overstaying; her mother would not take to it kindly if another person was now added through her. She tried her best to convince Ahini not to leave her home. But Ahini was adamant and did not like to listen to her at all. She came out to the road.

Dharani found Tagar lying unconscious on the floor with her hands outstretched as soon as he entered the bedroom. A shiver went down his body seeing Tagar's condition. Placing her head gently on his lap, Dharani spoke to her. There was no response. He touched her body to wake her up. Still there was no sign of any movement. He took his finger near her nose and found that she was breathing regularly. The body too was warm. He did not know what to do at first but then slowly lifted her up and made her lie down on bed, her hair spread on both sides of the pillow. He loosened the hold of her *riha* which tightly enclasped her body. Her two cheeks had a red tinge and she was

sweating profusely. He fanned her to make her feel a bit cool and asked, "Do you feel a bit better now ?"

There was no movement of the pupils of her eyes. Dharani now helpless, called out for Jetuki in desperation. He heard his mother crying and declaring her intention to leave the house. But he had no idea that she could actually leave the house on account of what had transpired a little while ago. When there was no sign of Jetuki, Dharani went out himself to fetch water.

The sun was beating down hard on the courtyard. There was a hot breeze blowing. Perched on the paddy spread all over crows were screeching noisily. A dog was restless and saliva was coming out of its mouth. So unbearable was the heat. There was a creaking sound coming from the clump of bamboos in their backyard. Everywhere he found something lonely and alien, something that appeared to him very suspicious. Dharani had no doubt that she left the house.

He came near Tagar, water jar in hand. She was as motionless as before. Dharani sprinkled water on Tagar's forehead and washed her eyes. She opened her eyes a little and there was a groaning sound, followed by one deep breath, sucking in the air. Dharani drew her head near and asked, "How do you feel now ?"

Tagar raised herself suddenly and looked around trying to recall what happened.

"Oh, God! Who has made me sleep now? I have to gather the paddy, have a bath before I could do anything !" There was a strange look in her eyes as she muttered these words. It was if she was not in her senses. Turning towards Dharani she asked, "When did you come? Did you have anything to eat? Mother must be looking for me. Let me go."

Dharani had no time to say anything. Tagar, her dress untidy and hairs dishevelled rushed outside. Dharani followed silently.

Tagar could realise even from outside something unprecedented had taken place. She stopped: her eyes had the look of a hunted deer. A sense of infinite sorrow and helplessness hung about those eyes as Dharani slowly narrated the stormy events that had passed. Hearing that her mother-in-law had deserted them and taken shelter in Jetuki's house, she cried and asked her husband, "Why did you allow her to go thus ? Why didn't you wake me up ? Why did you pick up a quarrel with her on my behalf? I was dizzy, yes, but how would she know that? I came inside without telling her because I thought I would be all right quickly. I do not know what happened after that."

Dharani now realized that it was not prudent to offend his mother. He heard with a sense of guilt what Tagar had said.

"She spoke harshly," Tagar continued, "because she is your mother after all. At another time she would have showered affection. Was it right for you to be carried away by anger? Let us go to Jetuki's house and bring her back, I cannot stay in this house otherwise."

It did not take them long to bring Ahini back to their house. Jetuki's mother was very unhappy, she came over to their house at a very inopportune moment. She rebuked her daughter for bringing her along saying, 'It is natural for mother and son to quarrel. They would have got over it anyway. Why did you poke your nose into all this ? People will say that you have not stuck to your own husband's house, and now you are breaking another family apart.' She persuaded Ahini to go back for it was her house after all and she was not to leave it at any cost. If at all necessary, she could ask her son and daughter-in-law to live separately.

Ahini realized that it was not proper on her part to have left their own house in a fit of anger. Yet she was uneasy enough not to go back on her own after all that had happened. She began to cry keeping her head on a bag of clothes she was carrying.

Her daughter-in-law and son reached Jetuki's house and Tagar rushed to her and began pleading with her to come back home. Seeing Tagar cry touching Ahini's feet, Dharani came forward and did the same. No further persuasion was needed. Dharani led his mother back by taking her hand. Tagar with the bag of clothes followed like a shadow.

The sincere concern of her daughter-in-law and the son helped Ahini to regain her old prestige as well as the position of authority in their household.

The door of the kitchen room opened again with a creaking sound. Tagar gathered the paddy that was scattered on the courtyard. The breeze became cool in the evening, rustled among the dry leaves and light wisps of clouds appeared to move in the sky. It was evening time. In the *Namghar*, it was time of prayer.

As days passed, the neighbours lost their keenness and curiosity about Ahini's tales of misery and misfortune and they rather blamed her for not getting on with her son and daughter-in-law.

Tagar bore all the pain and humiliation inflicted on her with patience and fortitude. It was not in her nature to tell her own side of the story to others and invite their pity or sympathy. She thought it was her duty to make her husband happy, come what may. She had on no occasion reported to her husband even a single instance of the harsh treatment meted out to her by her mother-in-law. She tried to satisfy her mother-in-law in every possible way.

Tagar at times shed silent tears thinking of what her own father thought of her and all that he had done to disbelieve her and cast doubts on her complete innocence. He wanted to maintain his position and prestige in society but did not investigate into the truth of what was being said before giving her in marriage, so hurriedly. Love for his own daughter was

sacrificed at the altar of social position or fear of malicious gossip in the community. Tagar strove hard to keep this memory of what her father had done out of her mind.

But more she tried to erase old memories, they kept crowding in at certain times. Even small events were magnified to extraordinary proportion through his process. The golden moment in her life appeared at such times in the distant horizon like the dome of some sacred temple of the mind and heart. She was then reminded of a dream of these bygone moments although she was now the devoted wife of her good husband. But in the very next moment she corrected herself and through a fervent prayer got rid of the tribulations of the heart.

Dharani at times woke up to the warm breath and a long sigh of Tagar at night and held her fragile body in a deep embrace. He loved Tagar. Tagar reciprocated it with all her loving concern and regard for her husband. But at times there lingered a feeling: her heart's offering in the sacred altar had been taken away by the crow before it could reach her god.

TWELVE

Tagar was not feeling well for the last few days. She had lost her appetite. She had a feeling of dizziness. Her heartbeat was faster. She did not dare to tell her mother-in-law about her illness.

Among her neighbours, she was on very good terms with Pavoi. Tagar used to give her gifts from time to time and on occasions opened her heart to her. Pavoi too helped her by performing this or that errand. Pavoi brought some tamarinds to her as she developed a liking for it and told Pavoi accordingly. When Pavoi came there Tagar's mother-in-law was busy working in the kitchen. Putting the tamarinds on a fresh banana leaf and placing it on Tagar's hands, Pavoi asked, "Why have you developed a liking for these fruits now?"

Pavoi did not wait for a reply but observed carefully the subtle change coming over Tagar's complexion. Her smile had a meaning. She came nearer and asked, "When did the periods stop?"

Tagar would like to speak to Pavoi only and to none else. But when the time came for her to speak, she was overcome by anxiety and embarrassment. She brought herself to speak somehow, "It is more than a month." As she said, her face turned

crimson but she also had a sense of thrill, she never experienced before.

"Have you informed your mother-in-law?"

"Why are you asking me repeatedly," Tagar replied.

Tagar wished Pavoi would speak to her mother-in-law and it did not take Pavoi long to understand this. Pavoi told Ahini at the end, "You will be a grandmother soon" and waited eagerly for her reaction. Ahini who had already observed some change in Tagar could understand what she said, and her wrinkled face brightened up suddenly.

"Since when are you not having it," Ahini asked her daughter-in-law. "It is about two months," Pavoi replied on Tagar's behalf. "Please do not engage her in any taxing work from now on," she added.

"I have always been telling her," said Ahini, "Only the other day she fainted due to excessive work. She does not like to take rest at all. The moment she finishes her meal at noontime she sits at her loom. I did not know about her condition. Only god has brought you here today," she told Pavoi.

Tagar was too embarrassed to speak and she wanted to go away from there. Ahini asked Tagar not to wait for Dharani but to have her meal. Showing her annoyance at Dharani for always coming late, more so when he was going to be a father now, Ahini looked towards her daughter-in-law to say softly, "How long she who is unwell can wait for him? I will do the little work that remains in the kitchen. Please put a few coins and light an earthen lamp in the prayer house in the evening. God is kind."

Ahini was quite transformed from that day. For long she was appearing to be quite detached. She thought of herself as a burden on her son and daughter-in-law. She imagined that her neighbours were thinking of the end of her life.

But the prospect of the advent of the grandchild seemed to alter everything now. Ahini looked forward to living many years and her attitude to everything changed. Tagar was overwhelmed by her affection. It was as if the tree of her heart blossomed anew with fresh flowers everyday being watered by this affection.

From the day her granddaughter was born, Ahini began to regard her daughter-in-law with extreme fondness and a sense of indulgence. The birth of the child not only gave Tagar motherhood but also established her position as a housewife in others' eyes. The mother-in-law realised that the future of the family now hinged on the daughter-in-law.

Ahini rediscovered her childhood through her granddaughter. Her quiet and lonely old age began to be filled with noise and laughter. She had no time to sleep or to take rest. The child stayed with her throughout the day. Even at night if the child cried or woke up she used to ask the mother to feed her breast milk and if that was not enough she would often take the milk to the mother to feed the child then and there.

They called her Kamali. One day when Kamali was crying and there was no stopping her, Ahini took the child under her care. She rebuked Tagar for feeding the child in the presence of outsiders whose jealous eyes must have cast an evil spell. She then proceeded to chant an incantation which was accompanied by the throwing of a morsel of mustard seed into the fire in order to get rid of the evil spell. By the time it was finished the child was sleeping on her lap.

The sweet relationship with the child brought the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law close together as never before. The old bitterness was gone and Tagar received many a tip from her mother-in-law as a good housewife. Tagar was moved and in her heart of hearts she felt a deep sense of gratitude for her mother-in-law.

THIRTEEN

Dharani spent six months at his home without any work. He spent up all the money he had saved. As long as grains were stored in the granary they were not worrying about two square meals a day. It is ambition that makes a villager go in search for fresh avenues. Dharani could have remained content with all that he could earn as a cultivator, but a chance meeting with a gentleman from upper Assam who was in the tea business changed his outlook. However he had no other alternative before him except to look for a government job. He had to grease the palms of the chairman of the Local Board of Nagaon to secure his job. He was posted in Roha itself.

In fact, there was no need to teach the women of Roha to weave for they were all excellent weavers. The women of Digholdori, Katoni and Dimow villages were not required to buy any cloth from the local Marwari merchant. On the other hand, it was the merchant who purchased the cloth persuading the weavers to sell it to him at a throwaway price. When Dharani tried to teach them to weave on the improved fly shuttle loom, they took it to be just fun. They did not like to depart from the old practices of their forefathers in the village. The womenfolk would not change over to the more modern fly shuttle loom.

Dharani knew only too well that the lack of a modern loom was not the root cause of their poverty. They were knee-deep in debt; for credit they had nowhere to go except to the local moneylender. Dharani was convinced that they should work hard enough to produce more and marketing should also be better. Dharani tried to improve the traditional loom rather than replacing it with a new loom. He advised them to make their cloth according to the choice of the town people and he himself helped in marketing. Weavers now earned a lot more.

Dharani was amazed at the skill displayed by the women in weaving: they had an instant liking for beautiful design and wove these patterns skillfully into the fabrics in a perfect sequence of beauty and order. The girls took to the new designs more but even women in their late forties were not to be left behind. All of them loved to work on the loom at least once a day as regularly as they would offer prayers in the evening.

Dharani's zest for his work was suddenly interrupted by his mother's illness. His mother had been ill for several days. She did not take care initially and went on with her daily chores but on the third day she had to confine herself to bed, something that Dharani could not recall his mother doing at anytime before. She seemed to think that her end was near; she was not prepared to take any medicine at all. Dharani and his wife tried their best to change her mind.

On the fourth day she was in a state of delirium. But as soon as she recovered she made her daughter-in-law and granddaughter sit by her side. Tagar nursed her with all her strength and devotion. Finding Tagar all the time by her side and also nursing her continuously, Ahini stared at her with a vacant look and then pushed her to go out and have her meal. Tagar shed a silent tear when she saw her mother-in-law's affection for her. On one occasion, she made her bring out her small

ornament box containing the family ornaments and opening it with her own hand she gave the gold necklace to Tagar to give it to Kamali when she would grow up and then, handing over a beautifully embroidered shawl to Tagar she said, "Take it. This is for you. I thought of giving it as a marriage gift, but I couldn't." Tagar could not check her tears as Ahini said these words and closed her eyes.

Towards the evening, her condition deteriorated. She could not recognize them now. She was in a state of delirium. Sometimes she shouted 'Kamali, Kamali' and when her granddaughter was brought near her, she tried to place her shaking hand on her hand. Someone standing near remarked, "See her love for her granddaughter. This is not good for the child when she is on her death bed."

Sunod was reading from the scripture sitting near. At one stage he went close to the bed and shouted 'Narayan, Narayan' in her ears.

Dharani's kin from the village all gathered there. Some of them speculated on the probable time of her death: they were talking about it in the courtyard. One of them asked what day of the week it was, while another replied 'Tuesday'.

"What about bamboos and the firewood?"

"Should you keep the dead body for the night because it is Tuesday? Should not Dharani spare some bamboos from his own groove for his mother's cremation?"

They went on discussing about it. One of them said, "It would not be necessary tonight. The old woman is not going to die that soon." Another joined in, "Yes yes, he is correct. She might leave only towards the dawn."

"We hope she will not trouble us at night," another person said.

An elderly person asked Dharani if the Brahmin had been informed. Dharani cried seeing the eagerness to take his mother to the cremation ground when she was still alive. "What is the use of crying? This is the way of the world. Your parents will not be with you always. It is your good fortune. Ahini's good fortune too. She had received so much care and affection from her son and daughter-in-law! She stayed long enough to see her granddaughter," another person said consoling Dharani.

Sunod closed the *Kirtana* after reading one chapter. He agreed with Maghi and said, "Did not Vyasa Muni say the same thing in the *Bhagavata* that all creatures come to this tree of this world like the birds of the night. The moment it is dawn, they all fly away. Parents and brothers and sisters are known for a little while. Our own saint has said the same thing in the scripture."

Villagers in general could endure everything because they attributed all that happened to the will of god. The *Kirtana* would be recited by the unlettered and its message stood them in good stead at the critical hour. Through these teachings, they felt that they could survive all, dangers, disasters or even death. Deeply moved by the consoling words of the scripture Dharani came near his mother.

Sacred water from the holy Ganga had been brought from the house of Dighala Bapu. Dharani poured some drops of it on his mother's forehead. Another person standing near asked him, "Have you given the *panchamrit* to her?" Tagar took some of it from a container and put it inside the mouth of her mother-in-law to give her the last taste of worldly enjoyment.

It seemed she was waiting for this for she started breathing heavily. In a moment four of them took hold of the old woman and brought her to the porch. Dharani and Tagar started to cry in mourning. Men waiting to take the old woman to the cremation

ground got busy tying the knots here and there. Some went out to bring firewood, others to bring the cart. The Brahmin collected pure *durba* grass required for performing the last rites.

Sunod saw the old woman shiver as he came near to put the blanket on her in the light of the lamp and stopped for a moment. Seeing Sunod retracing his steps all of a sudden, others asked Tagar to put some drops of water on the mouth of her dying mother-in-law. And as she sucked the water drops in, Ahini started to breathe more regularly. The men again took her inside, no less dismayed by this sudden development. They seemed to view unfavourably at her intransigent spirit which refused to leave the world.

Her soul was perhaps afraid to travel alone on an unknown path on a dark night. It flew away at early dawn like the birds at that hour starting on their journey to the distant horizon.

CHAPTER - III

*A darling daughter, they call her
Some call her a sister...*

The daughter is now a housewife.

ONE

It was generally thought that when the lady in the house died it was not a good omen for the family. Dharani's mother died at an inauspicious moment, and it had become necessary to perform a more elaborate ritual as a result. But it is said once death had seen the inside of a house, like some stray cow coming in from nowhere, it was most likely that it would visit again.

Tagar was carrying eight month at the time when her mother-in-law died; somehow she performed the last rites for the dead. Being thus preoccupied she forgot all about her pregnancy. But from the day following the feast she was quite unwell. After severe bleeding for two days she had acute pain in the stomach. Dharani could not stand the sight of her suffering any more; he went to Dighala Bapu and brought some curative water prepared by him and gave it to his wife and when it had no effect on her condition, he sent out information to Pavoi as advised by Tagar.

Almost all the expectant mothers in the village took the help of Pavoi at the time of delivery. When Dharani heard Tagar asking for Pavoi he could know about the nature of Tagar's sickness. His face brightened at the prospect of their impending

good fortune. 'If it be a boy this time' with a sigh of deep satisfaction, he proceeded to the house of Pavoi. On his return journey he dropped in at the house of his father's younger sister and brought her along with him.

Pavoi knew every detail about the date and time of delivery of the expectant women of the village. She took her hand over Tagar's body and queried, "How many months." "It has entered the ninth month now," Tagar replied pressing her abdomen with both hands as if to suppress the pain.

"You have made a mistake, I believe," said Pavoi after examining her. "I don't think it is time as yet," she concluded and looked towards their aunt for support.

When Tagar did not say anything, the aunt asked, "Is the pain coming down"?

Tagar groaned turning in her bed to say, "It was quite tolerable in the evening. It is unbearable now."

Pavoi did not wait any longer but spread the bed on the bare floor. Tying a rope on the post, she asked Tagar to pull it with all her strength. Tagar cried in agony. Pavoi repeatedly admonished her for her impatience.

The frequent words of encouragement from the aunt had no effect on Tagar as she continued to writhe in pain.

Dharani was reclining on the bed with Kamali on his side but he was all the time hearing the groans of his wife in pain. He rushed to the room where Tagar was confined. Seeing him there his aunt came out of the room.

"Nothing so far but she is in great agony."

"She had no such pain when Kamali was born. Is there anything to fear," Dharani asked in great consternation.

"No, there is nothing to fear, but there is some danger for the child, it seems. That is why there is so much delay. She is also suffering. Please go to Gopi Ojah's house and bring the medicinal water and one more rope."

"Let me go. Please look after Kamali: she might get scared when she wakes up." Dharani then left for the house of Gopi Ojah through the darkness in great hurry.

Ojah woke up at Dharani's first call. It was his command that kept the evil spirits of the country side under his control, this was what the people believed. Ojah had a lurking fear that these spirits might under the cover of the night come out by calling him by his name and strangle him – they were so inimical to him.

But he could recognise Dharani's voice and came out without fear. Having been told of the condition of Tagar he handed over a red thread to Dharani and said, "Let her tie this thread on her left hand after taking a deep breath, you will see she will not take much time, the baby will be delivered as soon as the thread is put on." Dharani took it and hurried home.

But before Dharani had reached, Tagar's agony was over. Her body lying on the floor had a death-like pallor. Pavoi covered the stillborn baby with a bark of the betelnut tree and then, with pick and shovel in hand went towards the bamboo grove.

After her mother-in-law had died, the burden of running the entire household fell on Tagar. She could move about freely as long as her mother-in-law was there. The house too had a grave and dignified look. It was so empty now; one hesitated to enter it even during daytime. The presence of her mother-in-law was as much a part of them as was the big mango tree on the open field even though it was not fruit bearing. Tagar missed

her mother-in-law even more at the time of her confinement. When Kamali was born she did not allow Tagar to do any work for full one month. But now she had to do everything from grinding paddy to carrying water right from the eleventh day.

Dharani was always indifferent to his household duties. He liked to spend most of the day outside the house. Two unfortunate events in quick succession increased his indifference rather than reducing it. Leaving aside all the household chores in the charge of his wife alone, he seemed to go about somewhat unmindful of his responsibilities.

Two

Roha was in between the Brahmaputra and the Kapili river. It was also fringed by the serpentine course of the Kolong river. At one time it was thickly populated. Those villagers of Kampur, Dondua Charaibahi and Geruabo Kani were prosperous, having grains and fishes in plenty: the cowsheds and the granaries spoke their own story. On the banks of the two rivers, Kolong and Kapili and on the alluvial sand downs of the mighty Brahmaputra one could see seemingly endless rows of green fields of potato, sweet gourd or mustard cultivation. In between there were fields of sugarcane.

In the past fresh rain water used to inundate the entire valley. Water overflowing the swamps and the fresh water lakes right from the Brahmaputra river threw up shoals of fishes all around. Once the April showers moistened the fields, the cultivators would start ploughing. But the waters changed its course once the south bank of the Brahmaputra river came to be inhabited by the immigrants coming from the Mymensingh district. The gradual building up of the banks, the zig-zag course of the embankments did not allow the river water to flow as freely as before. In course of time the local Assamese peasantry were left without land of their own to cultivate mustard and pulses during winter. Even the thatch and reed grass available in

plenty on the riverside with which they built their houses after every flood became quite scarce.

On the other side the railway line of the Assam-Bengal Railway and the Silghat-Chapormukh line put obstruction on the flow of the water of the Kapili river causing an uncontrollable flood every year, causing damages to the life and property in the neighbouring villages. Kapili would then behave like a turbulent hilly stream. No one knew when the waters might rush in: sometimes waves of flood would come in quick succession. At other times there were prolonged spells of drought rendering the fields barren and the cultivator pauper.

Since water during April was scarce, the cultivators were putting more stress on growing the main summer crop but that year due to the untimely flood caused by the Kapili river, there was no trace of silt in the field. In almost every house the granary was empty; there was scarcity every where. Everyone was waiting for the winter crop.

Dharani with the help of Monohar and few other young men of the village formed a relief committee to help the most needy amongst the villagers. Some families had been supplied free yarn to give them a little income. Dharani also got a petition submitted to the Collector on behalf of the villagers recording their signatures on it. He also approached the district Congress president requesting him to send cotton and spinning wheel.

After a hard day's work of providing relief to the villagers, Dharani was returning home in the evening. The village road had already become lonely as there was no passerby. Only some carts loaded with jute or hay stalks were going along the road at irregular intervals moving very slowly. From the community prayer hall in the village came the sweet sound of the devotional drum. Some gentlemen talking loudly passed by his side. Dharani looked back; each one of them had on their shoulders a bottle of oil and

a bundle flung across on a stick. Dharani could recognise from their tone that they were from the Barpuzia village.

"Brothers, where have you come from? There is no market on this side today. Have you been to the town?"

The first two persons did not reply. One of them recognised Dharani and said, "Oh it is you."

Dharani nodded and said, "Brother Thogi, where did you all go?"

"Where could we go after all! We have been to the grocery shop of Ramnarayan Babu."

"You are late, you have a long way to go, it is night already."

"We came quite early but the babu delayed us as he kept on bargaining unnecessarily till evening!"

"Have you taken a loan?" Even the simple villagers knew that it was humiliating to be in debt. Thogiram took his face aside, put a betelnut piece to his mouth and sighed a bit sadly and said, "So far I was managing without taking any loan from him. But this year it was not possible to avoid. Whatever Ahu paddy I had planted was completely washed away by the flood. Otherwise I would have been able to manage till the onset of winter."

"How much have you taken?"

"Five rupees each. Even that he did not like to give. He agreed only at the request of Dimbadhar. If he has the name recorded in his book he prefers to give oil and salt on loan rather than hard cash."

"What are the terms of repayment?"

"We have assured him a return either in terms of paddy or failing that by hard cash next winter."

"What is the exact price of paddy you have fixed?"

"How do I know? It is Dimbadhar who has negotiated the deal. He will do whatever is necessary. Babu has been very kind. But his father was a better person. This one knows how to squeeze only." His two companions who were going ahead shouted, "Come on! Come on! Follow us. We are going ahead."

"Oh! Dimbadhar and others have gone ahead," Thogiram looked back and said, "Now I want to ask you something."

"What is it," Dharani asked.

"That petition we had submitted to the collector. Did you get a reply?"

"How can you get it so soon?"

"Yes I thought as much. How can you hope to get any remission of land revenue? Being persuaded by those young men I did not pay land revenue but I have to pay the whole of it at a time now along with interest because of the delay," Thogiram muttered to himself in deep disgust.

As he walked on the dark, Dharani drew a deep breath to relieve himself of a sense of anxiety. He was quite alarmed thinking of the grim future that Thogiram would face. Once his name found itself in the Marwari trader's book, there was no escape. That small loan would grow like the seedling becoming a banyan tree. It would continue up to his grand children even. Leading men in the village, the likes of Dimbadhar had thus brought ruin on the poor villager. At some small profit for himself like getting the salt or oil a little cheaper than the rest he had sacrificed the innocent and the illiterate villager at the altar of the greed of the Marwari moneylender.

Absorbed in the thought of the poor villagers and their numerous wants, Dharani was walking slowly. There was a small road leading to Topakochi village just in front of the inspection bungalow. As Dharani approached the compound of the

inspection bungalow, he was startled by the crying of a woman. He stopped. There was a sound of wailing coming from near the shrubs and the hedge which formed the boundary fencing of the inspection bungalow. There was also the sound of a conversation coming up from there.

"What is the point in crying like this? Get up, I will take you to your home."

"Get out of my sight, you rascal," someone was saying in reply.

"Look! Look! As if a saintly woman has come here. Get up, if anybody sees you in this condition, you will not be able to show your face in the village tomorrow. You son of a bitch have your spared anything in me to be able to show my face. Go away, I am not going with you."

"If you do not want to go, remain here," the man pretended to go away in anger.

Dharani now entered the compound of the bungalow through the gate. The man seeing Dharani dragged the woman and whispered, "Get up, Get up, someone is coming."

The woman pushed him out of the way saying, "Leave me alone, don't dare to touch me."

"What's the matter," Dharani asked and came closer.

"Stay on, here if you like," the man said having seen Dharani approach and vanished into the darkness.

In the faint moonlight Dharani could recognise him. He was Sonaram, son of Bhebela of Digholdori. He had joined as a *mondal* in the settlement office where a survey and settlement operation was going on. He had earned a lot while working in the immigrant villages of Lahorighat *mauza*. He had already constructed a new house in the village. He had now two cycles, there were brand new lamps to light up his house. He had new

clothes which he wore in fine style, a silk shirt, a pair of shoes and had put on a fashionable hair cut.

Dharani came nearer and asked the woman, "Where is your home? Why are you crying?"

His sympathetic words made her cry all the more.

"Why don't you say what's the matter," Dharani said a bit harshly in exasperation.

"Don't ask me. I should die."

"Why? Why do you want to die," Dharani asked anxiously.

"I have been ravished."

"By whom? Is it Sonaram Mondal?"

"No, by the officer," the woman continued to cry bitterly.

Dharani looked at her, quite stunned. The dark cloud that covered the moon so long withered away.

In the faint light of the moon Dharani could guess the appearance of the woman. She was slim. She had a sharp nose. Her hair was dishevelled, there was no veil on her face. The uncovered portion of her thighs appeared bare like the bone of some dead animal as she lay on the ground.

His lips twisted in suppressed anger Dharani asked her, "What made you come to the bungalow at night?"

The woman narrated her story, crying intermittently. She was from the Katoni village. Her husband died of Kalazar. It was not yet a year. She had two small children. She was living somehow with her small income from weaving. She could not pay her land revenue dues last year. They had issued a process warrant for attachment of property against her. She was on her way to the shop: she wanted to sell her *Endi* shawl to the Marwari trader. Sonaram met her on the way and brought her to the bungalow saying that the officer who had come from the town would allow

a remission of her dues. It became quite dark before the officer came. "And then..."

Dharani sighed in deep anger having heard it all in complete silence. He thought there was no way in which the poor widows could be spared the extremities of suffering and humiliation. Dharani consoled the woman and took her to her home at Digholdori that very night. Returning home at night Dharani came by the short route instead of the Local Board road. It was the month of Ahin: it was midnight. The moon had set. Fields were covered by mist. Over the sleeping green fields a cold breeze was blowing making Dharani shiver. None stirred in the village: only the scent of the jungle cat at night made the dogs in the houses bark from time to time.

Lamp was still burning in Dharani's kitchen. Tagar was cutting yarn. On her side there were knots of yarn like a bunch of flowers to be offered at the altar. When she heard her husband coming she placed a mat, a water jar and a towel in the courtyard. It had become Tagar's habit to remain awake till Dharani arrived. Dharani had his meal without any fuss and went to bed. He thought of waking up early for going to the inspection bungalow to find out the name of the officer who came to the bungalow last night. But Dharani got up quite late. He went to meet the chowkidar. The chowkidar was an 'upcountryman' although he could speak the local language fluently, having stayed in Assam for long years. The officer came towards the evening and left that very night. The chowkidar could not have his signature recorded. They did not recall having seen him at any time in the past. Dharani was relieved to find that the man was neither a magistrate nor an officer of any other rank.

Dharani had no time to go in search of him. He had to distribute advance money and cotton to the woman of Katoni on that day.

THREE

Dharani devoted himself fully to social work to help the poor and the needy in the village placing the entire responsibility of running the household on the shoulders of his wife. Praise of the people in the village acted as a stimulant in his case, as it happens normally, and Dharani was prepared to do anything for their sake. Dharani was striving hard to bring about a change in the village. Right at that time the non-cooperation movement was gaining momentum, students were deserting the schools and colleges, and they were coming back to the villages to make people aware of what was happening elsewhere. The villagers so long unaware of what was their real condition woke up now: they wanted change for the better. Days and nights reverberated with the cries of *Bande Mataram* everywhere. From different corners came reports of the burning of foreign clothes and the boycott of foreign goods. The movement spread rapidly. Picketing also started in front of the opium selling counters in the village and elsewhere.

Narayan Goswami opened the shutters of his opium shop to look inside. No opium addict was to be seen on the road. He opened the lid of a container and looked for something, which was not there, and asked, "Mohim, where did you keep it yesterday?"

Mohim, a Bengali, was a salesman. Assamese people were no good at the opium business. They had no experience: they could not be trusted also. Considering this aspect Narayan engaged a Bengali salesman.

A small verandah behind the house was converted into a kitchen for the *mahaldar* and his employee. The *mahaldar* was never short of cash, he always had more than enough. Eggs, fishes, seasonal vegetables were available in plenty: the opium eaters gave all these free so that he did not cause any loss to them by giving them less through manipulation of the scales for measuring the quantity of opium.

The *mahaldar* asked, "Where did you keep the surplus opium of yesterday?"

Mohim finishing a boiled egg said, "It is under the bedstead."

"Why did you keep it there? You should have kept it underground," putting the lid back on the container, Narayan said.

Going out of the kitchen Mohim replied, "Three days of the month still remain. We will need some extra opium. Lalung tribals of Dimow will be arriving any time."

The *mahaldar*'s face twisted a little and he said, "I do not expect them to come. Normally, they would have come in the morning. They must have come to know about the volunteers. If these Congress fellows go on picketing like this, it will be difficult to run the shop. I kept the two extra seers of opium quite unnecessarily. There are no prospects of sale, the money is gone. Even the opium is not of good quality. If it did not sell, I could have exchanged it for government opium. Even that is not possible now. It is all mixed with sugar. Already opium-eaters are disappearing. This will keep them away further."

"How long do you think this agitation will continue? They will be tired of shouting very soon."

Taking out the opium from under the bedstead, Mohim said, "This is for the good. We can sell them in the villages now instead of in the shop."

"What do you say? Who will dare to take it in the face of the volunteers? No, we cannot do it in the villages these days."

"You just see how we manage to do it. Do you think the opium-eaters can give up their habits easily? Where money is the matter, who will hesitate to sell? You will earn more in the process."

As they were talking, the opium card holders gathered one by one outside. The *mahaldar* went away, Mohim took his seat near the counter. The man in front pushed a rupee, taking it out from the purse tagged on to his waist. "I have only a small quantity left against my card. Give the entire thing," he said.

Mohim entered the date and quantity on the card of Podo Kaiborto. Mohin put a coin on one side to manipulate the weighment quietly, but hiding it from Podo, he said, 'Look, Look, see the weighment yourself. Do not complain later.'

A man standing second in the row wanted to please the *mahaldar* and said, "Why do you say like this? Do we ever complain at any time? We are satisfied with what we get."

Quite reluctantly, Podo examined the quantity as Mohim placed it in his hand and muttered, "Your quantity is getting less and less with every passing day. It is being reduced so drastically now. They are sucking the blood of the opium addicts – god will certainly judge one day."

"Get away from here, you will be taught a lesson if the volunteers come. I have been walking over four miles. More delay means trouble."

Mohim kept the small quantity of opium, snatched from Podo in a separate container; he looked outside raising his head and said, "Are you Noram? Noram Deuri?"

"Yes yes. I am, sir."

"You have no quantity in balance in your card?"

"I have a very small quantity to take, I am sure."

"No no, you have taken it all. Nothing remains."

"What is this card business government has brought in to deprive the opium-eaters of their small pleasure? Give me some small quantity, for which you take whatever you like. How can I live without it any way? I have to arrange a small amount by any means."

"We cannot keep extra opium in our stock. Please go to the backyard of the house and speak to the *mahaldar*, he will help you if he can."

He returned the card. As Noram left, the man standing third in the row took his place. The fourth – then the fifth, the sixth – about ten or twelve opium-eaters collected in front of the counters. Mohim went on giving them to each according to his requirement. Some of the addicts kept a sharp eye on the way Mohim was measuring the opium and observing this Mohim shouted at them, "You have already got your portion, then why do you wait?"

"We are going, why do you want to drive us out?"

"Why should I drive you out? It is all for your good. Once the volunteers are here, they are sure to obstruct and push you around. Even the police party could be here today. The Daroga of Roha Police Station made enquires yesterday."

As if Mohim was making a prediction correctly, many volunteers waving the Congress flag and shouting *Bande Mataram* reached the opium shop to start their picketing against the sale of opium. As soon as they heard the shout the opium addicts ran away fearing trouble. Those who had paid and were standing near the counter to receive their share of the opium

pushed their hands inside all at a time and created quite a commotion.

It was the month of *Bohag* and the sun was beating strong. One could hardly look towards it with bare eyes. Although the heat was intolerable, the young volunteers hardly cared. Inspired by the call to liberate their motherland the young volunteers' spirit of sacrifice and self-denial were heated up by the red-hot sun. Ensconced firmly in front of the opium shop, they were singing: the intermittent cries of *Bande Mataram* filled the air and threw up a challenge to the sun. *Bohag* is about to end. Once the month is over the quota will lapse and it is this fear that made the opium addicts trek miles braving the sun and the scorching heat. Some of them managed to inch forward to the shop counter despite the entreaties of the volunteers and purchased opium.

Kusha Gogoi, leader of the volunteers knew *mahaldar* Goswami since his school days. Having failed to stop the opium eaters he shouted at Goswami, "Gosain, please give up this opium business. Should you being a Brahmin take up this shop? Why can't you earn your living through your disciples rather than exploiting these poor helpless souls? Why do you want to get rich in this way?"

"I would like to give it up today itself. But will the opium addicts give up eating opium? Will not other *mahaldars* come forward? You say as if it is necessary to give up opium to attain freedom," Goswami said in a bantering tone.

"It is true one does not attain freedom merely by giving up opium. But opium has made the villagers feckless and timid, almost like children. This habit is taking them downhill very fast, will crush them ultimately. The Mahatma believes that if the Assamese villagers give up opium, they will get back the prowess of their ancestors and raise their head against oppression. They will be able to ask for their freedom like true human beings."

The volunteers heard these words which were nothing short of a rousing speech, and shouted *Vande Mataram*. As Kusha Gogoi was engaged in this talk with the *mahaldar*, Mohim was smart enough to hand over their quota to the remaining opium addicts and to get them dispersed quickly. Other opium addicts who were watching from a safe distance moved forward. The volunteers pleaded with folded hands saying, "For god's sake and for the sake of the motherland, do please give up opium," but to no avail.

Sukmol Kachari, *mahut* of the elephant of Mohan Gaonburha, was one of those standing and watching. He had returned home in the noon having taken the elephant to Kampur in connection with the marriage of Goswami's daughter. As soon as his work was over he rushed to the shop for opium as his old stock had been exhausted. The rupee he earned in the marriage ceremony was in his purse tied to his waist band. He had no opium since morning, was already feeling sick with a burning sensation all over his body. He found that the volunteers were having a very good time not allowing the opium takers to proceed to the shop: they had surrounded the whole place and were baying like foxes.

"Get out of the way, please, do not obstruct. Let the opium addicts go to hell, it is none of your concern. Look at them, they will bring freedom to the country by depriving the poor of the little opium that they take! There is no need to help your Gandhi to become a Maharaja by a doing all this, go away from here," Sukmol proceeded to the shop bypassing the volunteers. Other opium addicts followed him. Volunteers, after failing to stop them in any other way lay prostrate on the ground not allowing Sukmol to proceed further.

"What is this nonsense? You all are from good Hindu families, how can I go across when you are lying on the floor,"

Sukmol stopped for a moment scratching his bare body with the handle of the knife which he carried.

"Either you go home or cross over our bodies."

After standing there for sometime, Sukmol along with the other opium addicts returned to the shade of a tree. The volunteers soon got up, shook the dust off their cloths and returned to their seats. No more opium addicts were expected to come to the shop today. The volunteers could go if those addicts who were already there left the premises of the shop. That was the third day of picketing undertaken as directed by Dharani. The number of opium addicts buying opium was gradually decreasing. People in the village were trying collectively to oppose the habit, determined to see that the addicts in their own village give up the habit first. Everywhere there was heated talk about those who were beaten up by the Police while picketing. Just at that time the police inspector with two constables who hailed from upcountry side reached the spot. Kusha Gogoi, flag in hand stood up in front of the policeman shouting *Bande Mataram* and others soon joined him in the shout. Looking towards the volunteers, the Inspector asked the constables to handcuff Kusha Gogoi. A sense of pride made Kusha Gogoi's face turn crimson as soon as he was detained. Looking at the opium addicts, staring in their mortified diffidence from the shade of the tree where they stood the Daroga asked, "What do you want? Why don't you take the opium if you want to?" None of them dared to defy the Daroga's command. Sukmol was already feeling uneasy. He heaved a sigh and approached the shop slowly. He took out the permit and was about to hand it over on the counter along with the money when twelve-year-old Dhananjoy, son of Manik Gosain, and a volunteer stretched himself in front blocking his way.

Sukmol knew the youngest son of Manik Gosain well. If anyone wanted to stage a *bhaona* in the village *Namghar*,

Dhananjoy was called upon to perform the Krishna dance. He was a favourite with the villagers. Good looks, curly hair and soft skin made him the local actor for the role of Krishna. Sukmol had taken him on his elephant to the *bhaona* quite often. As his feet touched the outstretched body of this high-caste Brahmin, Sukmol shrank back in horror and was forced to take a few hurried steps backward. "Oh! What a sorry pass things have come to now? A son of the revered Gosain is to take part in this sort of a thing! My feet touched his body. I have sinned," Sukmol said regretfully.

"You are well served. Why did you come to take opium," Dhananjoy spoke looking sternly at him. In his words one could discover the injured sense of innocence of the boy Krishna.

"You are also saying that? How can you give up something which has grown into a daily habit? I feel sick even if there is half-hour's delay in taking it. How will you realise since you have never tasted it."

The Daroga was beside himself with rage seeing the audacity of one so young and he cast a commanding look at the policemen, who got the hint and pulled Dhananjoy and dragged him out of the way. Sukmol's face became pale from a sense of guilt. He muttered within himself, "Well well, let it be. I shall not touch it again. These demons have not stopped short of dragging the boy, the son of Gosain. There is no place for kindness or affection in this world."

As Sukmol returned without purchasing the opium, the volunteers looked on. Throwing the permit at them, Sukmol shouted, "Take it, take it and give it to your Gandhi Maharaj; he has seen to it that we take no opium."

Brandishing the permit thrown at them by Sukmol, the volunteers were shouting *Bande Mataram* and *Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai* in sheer delight. The Daroga was quick to react. Throwing

a circle around and moving swiftly, he came near Sukmol and slapped him squarely on the face: it struck his ear and it made a deafening thud. Sukmol, dizzily swinging almost like a pendulum fell on the ground.

The sun at the end of a long day appeared a bit wan. *Mahaldar* closed the bamboo gate in a hurry. Daroga handed over Kusha Gogoi and Dhananjoy to the constables and started on his cycle. Tired and worn due to the scorching sun over their heads, the volunteers came a long way following their arrested colleagues, who were handcuffed and dragged along by the policemen. But they had a smile of victory on their lips and Dhananjoy, with handcuffs on led the singing. They sang in unison a popular song:

*O my brother opium eater
Why do you make us suffer
You have only the bowl for begging
But we have our bones for breaking.*

The song wafted along by the evening breeze invested the village with a grim sense of sadness and a death-like quietness. It soon got mixed up with that sense of forlorn longing for the freedom of motherland which filled the air in the village like the eager calling of the mother cow for her lost calf.

FOUR

Mohan Gaonburah did not keep his elephant inside his spacious compound. It was usual for him to keep it on the riverside tethered to a banyan tree. Sukmol used to stay in a nearby hut. Gaonburha got the message in the night itself: the elephant had come back from Kampur but Sukmol had not taken it out for grazing. The Gaonburah came early in the morning to enquire about the matter. What he had heard was no doubt true: the elephant was starving. It had nothing before it except the dry skin of a plantain tree. The mark on his body given as usual in a house of wedding was still visible.

The elephant had gone without bath for two days running and that too when it was an extremely hot time of the year. Annoyed by this negligence, Gaonburah was furious. He started abusing the *mahut* and came to speak to him personally in the hut where Sukmol was staying.

Sukmol was uneasily shuffling in his bed moving from one corner to the other. His entire body was littered with the saliva discharged from the mouth. Gaonburah abused Sukmol profusely for giving up opium at this late stage. "You fool! You want to join Congress at this late stage by giving up opium. If the government comes to know, you surely will land up in Jail and I shall have to

face much trouble and harassment for your sake. Let not yourself suffer so much and fret about. I have a small quantity, which I shall be sending to you. You take it and also take out the elephant for grazing. It has become a skeleton, having starved for two days," the Gaonburah said.

The Gaonburah sent a small quantity of opium through his son and at the sight of it Sukmol's mouth watered and drops of saliva were seen oozing out from it making it like the tongue of a rabid dog and the first impulse of the man was to snatch it and put it instantly inside his mouth. But the scene of his feet touching the head of Dhananjoy, Gosain's son came back to his mind and a shiver ran down his spine almost immediately. He asked the boy to take the opium back. Sukmol took out the sharp-edged *dao* kept hung on a thin bamboo hanger attached to the wall and came outside. He mounted the elephant as usual on the support of the two fan-like ears and took his seat. He tickled the ear holes with his feet and asked him to move forward.

"Oh, poor fellow has not had anything to eat since yesterday," he said tapping the elephant's head and reclined himself on it: the elephant too responded by moving its trunk to softly roll over Sukmol's back. Sukmol took the end of the trunk on his hand, touched it with his brow and kissed.

The elephant to Sukmol was dearer than life. He could go on without food for days but would become restless if the elephant missed a single meal. He was filled with a sense of pride riding the elephant. He felt he was more powerful than any other man in the village: nothing seemed impossible to him then. He could pluck fruits from the furthest branch of the tree, he could with ease uproot the most robust bamboo out of its grove or remove the strongest tree. When he used to take the elephant for bathing usually at noon time, the school boys would often applaud and sing:

*Sukmol rides the elephant home
The lazy ones are all undone
And so on.*

Sukmol was so happy then. He would take the elephant playfully near the children to scare them away: some would run away, others would fall on the ground in trying to do so and abuse Sukmol.

Sukmol used to take the elephant to the swamp which was full of wet tall grass and while returning would carry sheaves of fodder grass for the elephant. He would then take it to the river for a bath. This on a normal day would take the form of a ritual. But today, Sukmol himself was not too well. He managed to somehow wash the elephant and bring it to its resting place on the riverbank.

Reaching home Sukmol was continuously suffering from an agonizing stomach pain, he would bend down and rush to the toilet to be relieved temporarily but it would start all over again. There was blood in the mucus every time. Pain at times was so severe that his responding to the call of nature would make him feel as if the intestines would burst or if he stopped the call of nature forcibly, the pain would become so intense as to make him almost numb.

Sukmol was serving with Mohan Gaonburah for many years. He knew what the elephant meant for him. Moreover, if something happened to him it would be difficult to manage the elephant. Mohan Gaonburah was convinced that he would be able to persuade Sukmol to resume the opium habit. Keeping this in mind, he came to Sukmol with a small dose towards the evening. "Your health is everything," he tried to argue with Sukmol and even quoted the scripture but the irate *mahut* had the same reply every time. "You know how we Kachari *mahuts* are! We do whatever we are bid to do, to stand or to sit it out but once we

utter the word 'No' it is 'No' and 'No' only. Whatever be the consequences, even let it be even death we do not care. Give me if you have any other medicine but not opium."

Gaonburah annoyed at his adamant attitude left the place in a huff. But early next morning Gaonburah came again to enquire about Sukmol.

The elephant, untethered at that hour was standing on the threshold of Sukmol's hut. He moved away slightly at the approach of the Gaonburah. A blackish dog, its tail tugged in behind the legs and barking came forward. There was no sign of the *mahut*. Did he leave for the village early in the morning? There were some signs of someone trying to open the door. Who could it be? Certainly not the fox, it would not have dared. He opened the door silently to peep inside. The sound rattled a few rats, they ran away and entered an empty pitcher. Sukmol, half naked was lying on the floor. The foamy liquid trickling down on to his cheeks attracted flies all around. Ants dug holes into the eye sockets and nose; there were cockroaches on the floor. The stench was unbearable. It hit the Gaonburah directly on the nose so much so that he, closing the door and spitting left the place in a hurry. The elephant lifted the head and observed everything quietly. It was a moving sight. Tears flowing from his large eyes made even the animal an image of sorrow.

FIVE

Dharani who was looking for an opportunity to serve the cause of the country soon found an opportunity to do so. The movement in the Roha area was led by Dharani. His house was filled up with volunteers, young boys and girls, who would want a word of advice or some responsibility. In a few days, it became like a place of pilgrimage.

Service to the country in the eyes of the Government was an offence. Police always looked towards Dharani with suspicion because he was devoting himself to the service of the people. Men of the intelligence or those who spied for the government did not take long to find that Dharani was the leader of the anti-government movement in Roha. But it was not easy to trace him. Advised by his co-workers Dharani avoided police. When police could not trace Dharani, they searched or harassed those who were close to him or used to go around with him.

The movement spread like an infectious disease: The police could hardly check it. If it abated in some village due to the presence of the police, it started with renewed vigour in another village. The police inspector at Roha was very perturbed. His prestige gone, he could lose his job even. When he could not get hold of the main leader in the Roha area, he called his wife to the police station. Two red-turbaned constables speaking Hindi,

came to Dharani's house and ordered Tagar to come with them to the police station.

Tagar, familiar with the police searches in the village day and night, at homes since the movement started, had much less fear of the police now. But a good woman from the village was not a thief or a robber, and naturally considered it a disgrace to go to the police station. Unable to decide, Tagar took time to get ready. But once rebuked by the constables, she came out, fearing that otherwise they would drag her by the hand.

Drawing the veil over her face, holding Kamali's hand, Tagar started trudging her way to the police station a little ahead of the two policemen. Tears rolled down from her eyes in grief and resentment at the thought that her husband left her to face this torture all alone so that he could win freedom for the country. Tagar considered torture at the hands of policemen to be worse than death and she remembered a few lines of the *Kirtana* which she quietly recited. She recalled through this verse how the *rakshasa* enraged beyond all limit hearing god's command chased Prahlada spear in hand. But Prahlada remembering the name of god Vishnu ignored the fearsome threat held out against him.

Sitting at the police station, the inspector was wondering if he had done the right thing by sending for the wife of Dharani. As he raised his head, he saw a woman coming at a distance, followed by the two policemen. Why have they brought the girl along with her? If the woman had came alone, he would have at least enjoyed saying a few obscene words to her. Once near the police station, Tagar drew her veil a little longer, turned her back to the police station and stood facing the highway. Casting a piercing look at Tagar's attractive figure, the inspector asked her to go inside:

"Come on, come on. Who will bring you like a bride?" At the same time he asked the constables if she was Dharani's wife and stood near the staircase:

"Yes, yes. Please lift your veil a bit. At least, let me see the face."

The Inspector's greedy look swallowed Tagar from head to foot. The villagers always looked upon the police or feared it as if it was 'Yama', the god of death. The inspector's words started a tremor all over Tagar's body. Hearing the second sentence in fear or alarm, she became almost unconscious. Trembling severely and grasping her daughter's hand she slumped to the ground below.

That an anti-government volunteer, that too a common woman could show such delicacy of self-respect was quite intolerable to the inspector. He grimaced and spoke in anger to the constable at the verandah:

"Raghu Singh, catch hold of her. The sensitive plant is about to die."

When her mother sat down all of a sudden, Kamali was scared and started crying, keeping her head on her mother's lap. The inspector was even more infuriated at this and spoke:

"You fools. Who told you to bring the daughter?"

His head, turned back a little, his belly pushed forward, he waited a bit and looking at Tagar he said, "Enough is enough! Don't try to pretend anymore. Lift your face! Where are you hiding your husband, under whose bed? A beggar wants to show off! Those who do not have two square meals want to rise against the State. Yes, if you want to fight, do so openly, why this going about behind the back like a thief? Come on, let me crush you with my boot." He examined the left side of his footwear to see if the iron stud was in position.

When the inspector was busy talking to Tagar in this flippant way, he heard the sound of people gathering and speaking at a distance. The inspector and the constables looked

anxiously in the direction from which the noise was coming. Within a short time, a procession causing a kind of turmoil with shouts of *Bande Mataram, Bande Mataram, Bande Mataram*, could be seen moving into the police station. The clever inspector quickly got inside the room and asked the door and window shutters to be put down immediately. In the mean time, a seemingly endless procession was coming towards the police station raising slogans and causing great commotion. Feeling a bit secure inside the room, the inspector shouted at Budher Singh, "What the hell are you doing here, watching the fun? Go, ask them why they are shouting near the *thana*. Procession is banned here, tell them."

Having done the shouting to them in broken Hindi and gathering a bit of courage, he opened some files on the table to impress the constables. Raghu Singh advanced slowly. The inspector apparently concentrating on the files peeped through the door to see what Raghu Singh was doing.

When the villagers found Dharani's wife coming towards the police station with two upcountry constables it did not take them long to understand what it was all about. The word spread with the wind particularly at the time when the movement was on. The news spread from one end to the other like a forest fire. Like the *gopinis* rushing out to have a glimpse of Krishna at the sound of the flute, men and women, even the children came out in a bid to rescue Dharani's wife from the clutches of the police leaving everything else aside. A procession took shape quite spontaneously.

The story changed as it travelled from mouth to mouth. Some saw Dharani's wife being hand cuffed with their own eyes. Others said: Police dragged her in such a way that she had no clothes on her person. Some saw police kicking Dharani's small daughter. More the news travelled it became more and more colourful like a many-coloured romance.

There was a commotion in front of the police station. Like excited horses in battle, the crowd pushed and pulled in order to march forward. The sky rending shouts of the people almost tore British flag flying over the office building to pieces. Many in the crowd shouted directions grating their teeth:

"Who are you waiting for? Go inside. Catch hold of the Daroga by the neck and pull him out. What audacity to drag a daughter-in-law of the family in the village by engaging these sepoy who are foreigners in our land."

As soon as the direction was given, some broke the cordon and moved towards the compound of the police station. Alarmed, volunteers begged them with folded hands to behave:

"Please do not forget Gandhi's teaching of non-violence. There is no place for force or weapons in the non-cooperation movement. Please remember, we are not here to inflict punishment on the inspector. We have come to take back the wife of one of our comrades. A message has been sent to the Inspector through the constable to explain his conduct. Till we receive the reply, please do not cross the line."

Having sent the message to the Inspector through constable Raghu Singh the volunteers stopped the crowd from entering the compound. But as time passed, the crowd got restive. Unable to wait any longer, a few villagers, most of them middle-aged came out of the crowd and rushed forward. Among them was Bhedu who looked first at the volunteers and then at the crowd and said:

"Ignore these volunteers baying like the fox and singing *Bande Mataram*. What's *Swaraj* for, tell me? A daughter-in-law from the Bayan family has been dragged out of the house in broad daylight by two cursed foreigners—and you are still shouting slogans in triumph on the road, forgetting everything! How will you show your face to Dharani if you cannot rescue his

wife? Those who want to shout slogans, let them. Let us go ahead. Let us bring her back over the dead body of the Daroga. We are as lowly as the dust of the dog's feet – why should we be afraid of death?"

On that day, Dharani was staying in a neighbouring village. Manohar went there quickly and informed him of Tagar being brought to the police station. That police could go to such a length – Dharani had never imagined. Tagar whose shyness made her feel ill at ease to come even before the relatives had been dragged half-naked across the highway for everyone to see. How could she bear all this humiliation? She must be thinking of suicide. Where were the people gone? If the volunteers could not protect the respect of the daughters and daughter-in-law of the village, how could they bring *Swaraj*? Without a sense of self-respect, what could these weak people achieve even if they were set free? Dharani's resentment at himself and others increased more and more as he thought on these lines. In a moment, forgetful of the struggle for freedom and everything else, Dharani rushed to save Tagar from this insult and humiliation taking a bypass off the road across the paddy fields.

Dharani was stunned to hear the noise of the commotion near the police station. Almost all the elders of the nearby villages and others not so old had come there. Kandarpa Kaviraj who used to spend the better part of the year in a sick bed was there with a walking stick. Striking the ground with the stick, he asked the people to go inside the compound. Every man had vengeance writ large on his face.

Tears rolled down Dharani's face in gratitude and joy. The villagers were by disposition quiet and peace-loving. They generally followed the dictates of religion, or of government or of society without questioning them. But once they were roused, nothing would stop them. Like the onrushing flood on a river in summer, they would break all the barriers and move forward.

Dharani went forward quickly and intercepted the crowd. Men in front stopped suddenly, and those behind thought that they were afraid to move.

"What are you afraid of? Go ahead. We will all die together. There is no purpose in living if the women of the village are tortured by the foreigners. It is better that such a village is ruined."

Some of them craned their necks to see what had happened. Those in front passed on the information. Dharani has come to surrender himself. As they went on talking to find out what was the matter, Dharani started to address them loudly:

"I have come to surrender myself. Please do not think of vengeance but go home. You are deeply pained to see the insults heaped on my wife. For the sake of the freedom of the country, we should take such oppression as a blessing. We should be ready for greater sacrifices if the country is to gain freedom. There will be danger if you stay longer. You have been told about your responsibilities in this struggle. It is not the wealth of the rich, the strength of the powerful or the knowledge of the educated that will bring freedom. Freedom will be gained by the blood of the poor, ill-fed peasants of our land."

People did not have the courage to defy Dharani. The group in front retreated and all were now waiting for Dharani's wife. When the Inspector saw the people retreating and a man in Gandhi cap coming forward, he heaved a sigh of great relief. So long he had feared the worst, physical assault, or even death. Dharani looked straight through the door of the inspector's room and said:

"Daroga Babu, you want me. Has she anything to do here?" The Inspector clearing his throat with a dry cough, said, "No no, the warrant is in your name. I sent them to enquire about you, but the Hindustani constables did not follow what I said. I will place them under suspension. Don't be mistaken."

Now as soft as the earth drenched by summer rain, he asked after a while:

"Are they calming down? If you had not been here on time, there would have been firing. You have explained to them now—surely?"

"Why will they not disperse if you can convince them? The villagers are not as great fools as you people think. They are waiting to take my wife. If you allow, I can see her home," replied Dharani.

"If you do not take her home yourself, will it be..." the inspector did not complete the sentence, but spitting at the corner of the room said in agreement, "Yes, take her. Why should I mistrust you. But please, pacify the crowd with your persuasion."

As the constables came out to the verandah, he said almost in a whisper:

"Tell me, who does not want *Swaraj*? But what can we do? We cannot starve."

Dharani smiled, his eyes betraying his contempt for all the cunning of the Inspector. Before he finished speaking, Dharani came near Tagar. With police in front of her and the noisy crowd on the road, Kamali was scared so much that she kept on crying on her mother's lap. Dharani drew her close to himself and let Tagar walk in front of him.

On the way he explained to Tagar how service to the cause of the country made one bear insult and oppression. Like the wind failing to take away the dark clouds, Dharani's words glorifying the country did not remove the sense of humiliation or of utter despair from her mind.

Tagar did not say a word. Like the sky heavy with clouds, she followed Dharani, looking grave and lifeless. Even after hearing the strain of patriotic fervour in her husband's voice her heart was washed silently by a sense of deep mortification at the indignities she had suffered.

SIX

Dharani was sentenced to two years of imprisonment. As soon as the news spread there was a spontaneous *hartal* in Roha and all shops closed their shutters for three days. Meetings were held in different villages congratulating Dharani: they also adopted resolutions protesting against the prohibitory orders of the government. For a few days Dharani's patriotism and sacrifice thrilled the people with a sense of wonder and admiration.

Within about two months most of the young men of the village who joined the volunteer force found themselves in jail. Like nature settling down after a tempest, once the excitement subsided most people returned to their normal vocations. The common grievances of the long suffering people partially eclipsed by the dim hopes of freedom raised their heads once more. The farmers returned to their worship of the three main objects of their life: land, the bullock and the plough. Since the young men were inside, there was a shortage of men to work in the fields. Those who already handed over the plough share to the younger generation blamed the leaders of the freedom movement. They wondered how the leaders of the town proposed to win freedom by doing away with caste distinction and putting the young men behind the bar.

Dharani had asked a number of persons to take care of his cultivation. He requested his relations to help his wife with money occasionally. But not to speak of helping his wife they never bothered to visit his house once he was in jail. Tagar tried her utmost to cultivate their land through *adhiars* but failed as none responded. On the other hand, if the land lay fallow it was not possible to pay the land revenue.

Sunod came to her to make her part with the land in lieu of payment of land revenue.

"Is it true that you have refused to give your land to Bihbor this time?"

Drawing her veil in deference to him and offering betelnut on the tray, Tagar replied, "He wants it on *khandua*, only on paying the rent. If the Simalutol land is to be given on *khandua* without any crop share for whole year, the family will find it difficult to survive."

Taking the betelnut piece with pan leaf into his mouth Sunod said in a serious tone, "Looking at the condition of the countryside I feel most of the low land will remain uncultivated this year. There are no young men in the village to put in the hard work. How can the old plough the low land? At the eleventh hour land will have to be given without any share to the villagers of Katoni village. That's why my advice to you is that if Bihbor has asked for the land on *khandua* basis for only this year, it is better to give him. Let the rent be realised at least instead of the land lying fallow."

Tagar did not have the courage to ignore Sunod's advice. Without giving a decision she said mildly, "Whatever you think best, I have to do. What can a lonely woman like me say?"

Elated by the prospect of being able to fulfill his own selfish motive Sunod looking in the direction of Tagar said, "Bihbor is actually your kin from your mother-in-law's side. Don't you know?"

When Tagar did not indicate any recognition of this fact, Sunod continued, "How will you know? You are not from this village. The Gayan clan has spread itself about in about ten villages in the neighbourhood, it is so large. You will know if you are in the habit of visiting them."

When there was no response from Tagar, Sunod wishing to break the silence spoke to Kamali who could hardly understand what was going on, "You also seem to want betelnut," and saying this he gave a piece to her.

Kamali had never witnessed any affectionate gesture towards her from Sunod in the past, and if she came across him on the road he would rather give her a hard stare. His unexpected concern today made Kamali wonder. With an artificial smile on his lips Sunod said, "Your daughter looks so much like her grandmother. And why not? Was she not the apple of her eye? She called for her even in her death bed and then closed her eyes."

Sunod tried to cast an aura of sympathy over the whole matter by raising the context of her dead mother-in-law. About to leave, he said, "Then let me speak to Bihbor. He need not look for others' land. He need not have doubts about the land revenue. I shall pay it."

Tagar nodded her consent and went inside with the betelnut tray in hand.

With his intention to take the share of the crop with Bihbor, Sunod straightaway proceeded to his house.

SEVEN

After hanging around for a year or two, Kodo, the second son of Bhekola Bepari, joined his father's business. He used to take things, like, betelnut, banana and coconut to the weekly markets in Roha, Kampur and Phulguri, all nearby places. It earned him a modest income. Occasionally he would come to Dharani's house to collect mainly betelnut and lemon which he took to the market: his visits had become more frequent after Dharani's detention in jail. Tagar was thus able to earn some cash: on any day, if she found a sweet potato by chance in the backyard she got a good price for it. On other days someone would have it just for the asking. Kodo used to bring books of religion for her occasionally, and sometimes a fish or two which she was in the habit of accepting thankfully.

As the sun was about to set on the horizon, the mauve colour spreading over Tagar made her look very beautiful: it was as if the last glow of youth like the last lingering smell of the Bakul blossoms, filled the air with a mellow fragrance. Tagar was pounding rice: the quivering of her bosom, as a result of the vibrations suggested an overpowering charm of youth. Kodo came in with some articles he had brought from the market to hand over to Tagar and as he looked towards her, her physical charm claimed his entranced attention as never before.

Tagar's dishevelled hair touched her eyes and kissed her beautiful face several times: the earrings joining together in the rhythmic movement of her body disturbed her embarrassingly. She stopped to rearrange her hair and clothes and as she looked up she was caught unawares by Kodo's presence who had come there unannounced. She saw his gaping eyes inflamed by the afternoon glow of the sun. Instantly her face turned red with deep embarrassment. She saw Kodo enjoying it all and winking his eyes in an indecent gesture.

Kodo had a reputation for flirting with the girls in the village: he was also known for his loose tongue. It was evening – there was none in the house. Tagar was worried. With restraint she said, "I have no time to breathe even. You have come at such time. But why?" Tagar turned her back on him and started to collect the grain lying on the floor. Kodo tried to touch her heart with his words, "There is none in this region who is as beautiful as you are. I have seen really you today" and he started to move slowly towards her. Like all women Tagar too was pleased to hear her beauty praised and replied somewhat softly, "All right, if you have anything to say, come at some other time."

Kodo had an eye on Tagar for long and seeing that an opportunity had been laid bare, he became quite unrestrained. He asked shamelessly, "Shall I come tonight?" Tagar never thought that her words would be interpreted in this way by Kodo. The obscene hint unnerved her but she said almost mechanically, "Please do not come to disturb me at this hour," and she shouted at the top of her voice. Next moment she rushed out to the front of the house and shouted at Kamali chastising her, "Oh you cursed girl, where have you disappeared at this unearthly hour? Are you too greedy to taste the leftover in neighbour's house? The moment you come, I shall crush your head. You have not seen your mother's anger!" She continued to shout in this vein

for sometime more, the sharpness of the tongue was actually aimed at Kodo rather than at her daughter. Before Kamali could return home Kodo quietly disappeared.

Not to speak of Kamali, the neighbours never heard Tagar speak in this manner. Her abusive words made Kamali rush in with tears in her eyes. Tagar recovered her courage by holding her hand once she reached home.

That evening Tagar got the supper ready earlier than usual: for on other days Kamali would go on reading the primer lessons loudly till late night and she would be cooking in the kitchen. Tagar would listen and occasionally set her pronunciation right and correct her reading from time to time. She would also engage her in talk in order to ward off the lonely silence of the night. That night Tagar came out only once to throw out the waste water, her daughter also came along with her holding the earthen lamp. They had a hurried meal retiring to bed much earlier than on other days. She checked the doors and windows carefully before retiring. Kamali was very tired having roamed about the whole day. She was sound asleep in no time. Tagar checked if the earthen lamp was near the end, and poured more oil on it so that it was kept burning. By the time she retired Kamali was sleeping like a log. Tagar murmured, "Where have you been loitering the whole day, Kamali? Oh, such a deep sleep has caught hold of you." Putting her head softly on the pillow, the mother said, "Your father has sent a message through Monohar uncle, don't you know? Both of them were in the same jail. Monohar uncle has been let off as there is no more space there." Kamali, fast asleep hardly responded. Tagar sighed and said, "Monohar was jailed for one year but has been let off after a month. If they let your father get out of jail too? Oh! Look, how the girl sleeps!" Kamali said something in her sleep inaudibly. She put her legs on her mother's breast making her feel very uncomfortable,

particularly on a hot summer night. "You will sleep better when your father comes," Tagar said straightening her daughter's legs but she made no more attempt to awaken her. Before closing her eyes Tagar prayed silently for sometime reciting the thousand names of Krishna. Occasionally she woke up in sleep fearing some unknown danger. Muffled sounds of the night were sufficient to trouble her sleep. The rusted beam and the gable of the house made noises: there were at times, many a fiendish gesture before her sleepless eyes. The eerie silence of the night stealthily entered the room bringing in tidings of some sorrowful event. Tagar spent the night in fear of some new scandal or her ill reputation torturing her.

EIGHT

The month of Jeth was known for a prolonged spell of drought and the heat which was like a sharp-edged knife. Along with the first showers, came Malaria affecting villages on the bank of river Kolong. There was an outbreak of Cholera epidemic or small pox to add to the misery. Almost every house had someone sick.

Gerela's mother Muhita went out to the roadside to pick up some fern leaves for the night's meal. She reached the front of Bhedo's house. For three days consecutively, Bhedo's eldest son was running high temperature. As the evening got cooler, the father made his son sleep on a mat in the courtyard on the floor. Muhita approached the patient lying there. Bhedo was making bamboo slices smoothening it further with his hand. He spoke to his wife, "It is a bit cool today but he is too weak."

"He must have good food for days to get back his strength."

"Yes, I am thinking of giving him a good meal from tomorrow. Unless he recovers and becomes physically fit, there will be no hope of a good harvest this year. As for me I can hardly hold the plough due to the pain in the waist."

Separating the fern leaves with her hand Muhita said, "This is no time for cultivation in this heat."

Before Muhita could finish, Maghi arrived there and added, "But there will be nothing to cultivate on once the waters rise. Most of your fields are low land, to make it even worse."

Muhita, seeing that Maghi had joined the discussion moved slowly towards the road.

Bhedo gathering together stray bits of wood for fuel looked towards Maghi and said, "Tell me, what can I do? I have been giving medicines for over a fortnight now but the fever does not seem to subside at all."

"Why don't you try the magic potion of the *bez* from Digholdori village? The fever will be got rid of by his medicine in no time."

Bhedo replied, "I am all alone, you see. I have to look after the household and the cattle too. Anyway, I have to manage to go there somehow." There was frustration in his voice.

"Do you have any news of your other son? When will he be set free?"

"The term was for one year only. They say many have been discharged for want of space in jail. Joigo is expected one of these days."

"Yes, that unreasonable Dharani has started all this trouble in the village. The young men have gone to jail for no fault of their own."

"How can you blame Dharani? This movement has come like flood all over the country. How can Dharani or anybody stop this? Has your son only gone to jail? Kali Yug has ended, this is the time of Kalki. Maybe, the coming of Gandhi *avatar* will see the end of our distress and poverty."

Maghi had actually come there to ask for Bhedo's bullocks on loan. Leaving aside the talk about the movement, she said, "I am thinking of going to Digholdori one of these days to bring

some seedlings of paddy. So far I have not been able to go due to work in the field which is not over yet but if I get your pair of bullocks tomorrow, I shall certainly be able to proceed day after tomorrow."

Hoping to get the medicine for his son Bhedo agreed to lend the bullocks.

Fesew, a widow, lost her eldest son who died of Influenza. The youngest was affected and was being treated by the *kaviraj*. The eldest had died even after administering a herbal medicine. Fesew was now turning to *kaviraj*, who had given four tablets but the prescribed ingredients were still to be found. The disappointed mother was sitting near her ailing son. Medew, Pitiki and Bhekola's wife came to enquire about his sickness.

The three women were sitting in the courtyard: Fesew was offering them betelnut. Bhekola's wife was the eldest among them. Her tuft of graying hair gave her some importance. None seemed to know what her name was but everyone in the village referred to her as Bhekola's wife. "Do not depend entirely on the *kaviraj*," she said. "Your only son is already gone due to your fault. Don't you realise this?"

Bhekola's wife was quite outspoken but it cut no impression on Fesew. Women are no strangers to directness of utterance: they learn to bear pain and suffering at every step and as such do not like to camouflage their vital feelings. "What do you say, Pitiki? Should one not try the magical potion now," asked Bhekola's wife. Pitiki promptly replied, "Why not, a good *bez* should be able to get rid of the fever with a blow of the breath. Yes surely, he can do it." Spitting the betelnut juice on the ground, Pitiki said, "Gunai's second son was seriously ill the other day. The *bez* from Kuruabahi cured him completely."

"Why not pay respects to him and send for him now, asked Bhekola's wife.

Despite all the good advice, Fesew remained a bit indifferent. She had seen too much: has seen death and suffering from her early days. Her parents had died in her infancy. Her husband died when their sons were just toddlers. After this ten-year old son died the other day, the younger son was now struggling for life.

"Dadhiram has gone to meet Bhagwati at Garamur, I have sent some money and betelnut offering to him through Dadhiram borrowing money from Dharani's wife. "He will come back today. Let me see what is the advice Bhagwati gives, and if he says yes, I shall go for the medicine of the *bez*," Fesew told them.

Pitiki spoke gravely, "Oh yes. Dadhi's wife has been ailing for long. She has become a wreck due to chronic ailments, and such a strong woman once, she moves now by crawling slowly from her bed."

"Such ailments were unknown in the past. Where have they come from," Medew said in her affected intonation.

"Do you need anything more to call this a cursed village. Those who are destined to die will die in any case. But even the living are not spared the pain of death by those who rule over us. They are offended if someone merely shouts *Vande Mataram*, none heard such a thing before. If the young men are detained when the season was at its peak, where was the grain going to come from? The rulers instead of coming to the rescue of the poor were bent on torturing them and were deriving pleasure from doing so."

Bhekola's wife got up to go after making a wise sort of speech which owed a great deal to her listening to the daily gossip over politics that took place in her husband's shop. Other two women got up too. As soon as they left Fesew noticed that the tray which had on it betelnuts brought from Dharani's wife was empty. She wondered what she would take in the night to keep off her sleep while keeping her vigil near the ailing boy.

NINE

A moonlit night. The night sky was full of stars shining like the bright lights of the Deepavali festival. It was almost as bright as day. Sunod was sitting in the courtyard of his house weaving a bamboo basket. Putoli and Konlora, his daughter and son, were lying on a cot nearby and were gazing at the star-studded night sky. They were counting the stars and were occasionally fighting duels with each other. His wife finished her cooking, came out and sat beside the children. She was moving the hand fan to and fro to blow cool air to her children and herself: occasionally, she moved the fan in the direction of Sunod. When she asked Putoli to scratch her back where she felt the itch, Putoli unmindful of anything except playing with her brother promptly said 'no' and when she did not listen after her mother had told her two or three times, Sunod admonished her, "Why don't you do it when your mother has asked ?"

Putoli quite reluctantly started passing her hand over her mother's back. Meanwhile, the mother called her son Konlora to sit near her.

A calf was calling for the mother cow in the cowshed. Sunod's wife called out, "Sarudhan, take the lamp and go to the cowshed. The brown cow has not come back yet, may be she is near the gate. If she is there, bring her to the shed."

Sarudhan was preparing his lessons and objected, "No, I can't go now. I am reading my Sanskrit grammar lesson." Sarudhan started reading the declension in his Sanskrit grammar book aloud.

"Please do come, put the cow inside and go back quickly." Sarudhan's voice now became louder than before.

"A minute's loss will not matter. Do you hear? Please go and take the cow."

"Only I shall have to face the punishment of the class teacher if I fail to give my lessons tomorrow. Konlora is just sitting idle there. Why don't you ask him?"

"Don't make it an issue with Konlora. He is scared to go to the cowshed alone. You please come with the lamp."

Sarudhan went on reading as before. When the son did not stir himself from the seat, Sunod rebuked him, "What is this great reading you are showing off? One of you did not cross the sixth standard despite his not having anything to do with the work at home. You will perhaps meet the same fate."

Even the cat becomes submissive if it smells danger. Sarudhan grumbled but came out meekly in obedience to the command. With the lantern in hand he reached the courtyard. Sunod said, "Give the lantern to Konlora and put the cow inside. Give some hay fodder to the cows. I am not going there right now."

It was a night of full moon. The lantern was not needed. The lamp was taken as a measure of caution: it was partly meant to ward off any evil spirit that could be lurking nearby. The brown cow was not near the gate. It was Maghi's calf wanting to enter their cowshed forcibly: when Sarudhan reached the spot, the cow ran away. Sarudhan threw a bamboo stick on the calf to scare it away. He entered the cowshed and spread some hay for the cows there.

"No she is not here. It is Maghi's calf trying to force the

gate open," Sarudhan said as he sat down near his mother.

"This wicked calf always grazes on our paddy field; their owner never keeps it on a tether. We have to tell Maghi tomorrow." Sunod looked at Sarudhan and said, "Why are you sitting here? Why don't you go and resume your studies?"

His wife spoke on Sarudhan's behalf. "Let him rest a little. He has been confined indoors the whole evening." The mother as usual wanted the children around. She moved her hand fan in the direction of Sarudhan.

Sunod told his wife, "If the cow is not there the calf will be troubling us the whole night. Where has Monohar gone? Had he been around he could have searched for the cow and brought her back. Where is he off to?"

A village reform committee has been formed and Monohar is also a member, she replied with evident pride.

"What is the need for him to become a member or whatever you are saying? Were they not all handcuffed along with Dharani only the other day? This fellow, Dharani is the root of all trouble in the village. He has spread the poison of disaffection in the village. He has been well served being jailed for two years: let him now taste the food in that august house." Sunod said started to weave the unfinished basket furiously.

"Why do you single out Dharani alone? Did not all the village say that they have been exploited by the increase in land revenue? Dharani was the only one to represent their case."

"Rules are always criticized inside the four walls. Who asked him to call a public meeting and incite the villagers?"

"It is always better to be open than to go on simmering inside. Speak quietly to your friend, but to the elephant, speak only with the language of the baton as they say."

"Oh! You seem to have learnt to speak like a volunteer," Sunod told his wife sarcastically.

Moving the fan around, she replied, "It is always a crime

to speak frankly."

"You will learn the lesson when someday police will raid your house."

Hearing the very word police the children shrank back in fear. Sunod waited a bit and continuing to weave his basket said, "Till today we are lucky to be spared by the local officer of the police station. We know each other—our families were on visiting terms till the other day. That's why we are so far safe." To speak the truth he helped Manohar get released.

"If the ruler has the power, they can make us sit or stand as they like. Who can prevent them from doing so," the wife heaved a sigh and replied.

"Forget about those big things—you understand nothing. But do ask Monohar to keep away from these meetings. There is no need to keep oneself busy in these meetings till night: he need not become a volunteer. Spies are everywhere—one does not know when they will pounce upon someone." Sunod lifted his head to see if anyone was coming.

"Your son is now grown up. What can he do all alone in the house? He has been thinking of going to either Hojai or Jamunamukh to reclaim land. For two years we tried but could not settle his marriage."

"Can you settle someone's marriage in a hurry? Where is the suitable girl? Only then you can go ahead and ask."

"Did we not see more than one girl? You always find some fault."

"Tell me if we can select that girl from Digholdori as his wife. The girl is good, expert in household duties and has good character, the neighbours say."

"But they have no paddy land of their own and besides, so many mouths to feed! If you bring a girl from that family, you will always have to give them rather than get anything from them in times of need."

"Why don't you ask for the Bhuyan girl from the Teteli village? They are from a good family and are quite well-to-do".

"But the father has mentioned a bride price. How can you spare so much," Sunod replied.

"It will be proper for us to have Monohar married when we are still alive, if necessary by borrowing money. We also have to marry off our daughter Putoli soon."

Hearing his mother mention Putoli's marriage, Konlora pinched his sister. Putoli left the place crying.

"If you are so keen on your son's marriage let me approach Bhuyan for his daughter. Bhuyan will not hesitate to give his daughter in marriage to our family. But he is a miser. He won't reduce the price. Where do you get the money? Price of paddy is going down at this time. It will be difficult to manage the costs by selling what we have in the granary." Thinking for a few minutes, Sunod continued, "Dharani's wife has kept some ornaments in our house, has not she?"

"Yes."

"If I take some ornaments and mortgage the same with Chadmal Babu, I can borrow two hundred rupees – don't you think so?" Sunod waited expectantly for his wife to respond. "It's others' property, we have to give back intact when they ask for it. Why should we mortgage it," the wife objected.

"We can always get it back. It's a question of time only. Dharani has still to serve two years. Why should his wife ask for the ornaments before he is released from prison. It will be much secure in Chadmal Babu's iron safe than in that ramshackle house."

His wife who could follow the very breath of Sunod understood quickly what her sly husband was hinting at. Trying to cut short the discussion lest it led to something untoward, she said, "Wait wait, we can't do anything without asking Monohar. Dharani's wife gave the ornaments to him for safe-

keeping. He did not want to touch it at first. It was on account of the fear of theft or burglary that Dharani had given the ornaments and it was only when he convinced Monohar, he agreed to take it for safe custody. Your son is very straight in such matters: if he comes to hear what you say, nobody knows what a scene he could create."

"Well, well you broach the subject before Monohar. If I can mortgage at least a set or two, his marriage could take place in the month of *Magh* itself."

His wife did not say anything but moved her fan around rotating it more swiftly as if to ward off an unwelcome discussion. Sunod too concentrated on his basket weaving. The night sky became suddenly still.

After sometime one could hear Monohar's shout near the gate. "Sarudhan, bring the lantern. I have brought Mugi home. She was grazing in the field near the namghar." Monohar thought that his father would chastise him for staying out late and therefore thought it better to bring the brown cow home.

Sensing the presence of the cow near the gate the calf was mooing constantly. As soon as Sarudhan opened the gate, the cow ran inside. Monohar tied the rope. After the calf had his fill of the mother's milk, he separated them and put sheaves of hay in the stall in front.

"Where have you been till so late at night? I have kept supper ready for so long. We are all waiting. Putoli is about to fall asleep." She pushed Putoli to wake her up.

"Remove your leg," Monohar told Konlora and sat down on the mat beside him.

"Get up, Putoli, get up and get the dining floor ready for meals."

"My basket is finished," said Sunod. "Only a few knots on the left side remain," he added and looking up to Putoli, he directed, "Go, give me a jug of water for washing my feet."

Konlora and Putoli were both a bit drowsy. They just wanted to snatch some food and go to bed straightaway. Their mother's voice awakened them: they rushed to the kitchen. Once the children were gone Monohar's mother blew cool air from her fan on him and said, "We are thinking of getting you married to Bhuyan's daughter. It's a good family. The girl is good looking. If we can arrange the money, your father is keen to get you married in the month of Ahin itself."

All three remained silent for some time. Monohar broke the silence. "The girl's father wanted a bride price?"

"Why not? He has so far looked after his daughter and made her worthy," said Sunod. He started beating the basket with the blunt edge of his knife.

"Where will you get the money?"

"That is for your father. You need not worry," She replied hurriedly thinking that otherwise the unpalatable truth might come out of her mouth.

"Presently we may have to borrow two hundred rupees. I shall repay in Ahin after selling the paddy," Sunod said. After a little while Sunod said in a grave voice, "I am thinking of keeping a few ornaments of Dharani's wife with Chadmal Babu on mortgage and borrow around two hundred rupees, whether the ornaments are here or in his shop – it is very much the same thing, whatever you say."

Monohar got up suddenly like a serpent which had been struck and wounded and said in one breath: "No don't think of any such thing. Don't take out the ornaments for god's sake. It is not at all possible."

"Don't be so excited. Are we trying to steal her ornaments or sell to some other person? What can she do with this risky possession till her husband returns from jail? That's why I suggest mortgaging it for it will then serve both the ends. The ornaments will remain as they are and in between your marriage will be

over."

"No, no need to celebrate my marriage at the cost of others by keeping the ornaments that belong to others as pawn. Moreover, how can you have my marriage in Ahin, I am already planning to go to Hojai to reclaim land."

"I know how capable you are in such matters. You need not go out for land, arrange your marriage first. Your mother is desperately hoping for the marriage of her eldest son."

Monohar became all the more angry thinking that his mother had become a party to this crooked scheme to mortgage the ornaments given for safe keeping. He looked towards his mother and said aloud, "Give me the ornaments tomorrow. I shall return it. It is not safe with you."

"Go. Give the ornaments back. We do not want to get rich with the ornaments of Dharani's wife." Sunod somehow controlled his anger and looked at the basket in his hand more minutely.

The cruel blow of fate comes when one is expecting a joyful event. The mother heaved a sigh; the marriage of her son which she was looking forward to had again got deferred indefinitely. She moved out to the kitchen, trying to draw the curtain on the topic that could lead to a noisy altercation between father and son. The tranquil air of the evening was spoiled by the cloud of bitterness: even the stars seemed to close their eyes in sadness.

TEN

Bihu was not over yet. The spell cast on the riverside was still there. What great mystery was there in the bosom of the Kolong even after one had seen the river a thousand times! At noon and evening, the sound of the drum floating along its banks still make the young men and women feel a despairing joy. And many a time induced the young girls to do a dancing round keeping their pitchers on the bank. They put the orchids on their hairs snatching it from the *Ahat* tree standing nearby. And the boys, what mad fun was for them to swim in the swirling waters of Kolong in early summer!

The old custom of the villagers of visiting each other at the time of the Bihu was still there. Their dear Bihu—none seemed to like to bid it a farewell. In the afternoon, Tagar was returning with Kamali after a visit to Sunod's house on the occasion of Bihu. As she was about to pass by the front gate, the peon, Meetharam asked her, "Are you not Tagar Kalitani, Dharani's wife?"

Tagar turned her face a bit: she was chewing betelnut. "Yes," she said.

"Here is your letter. It has come in care of Dharani." Meetharam put the letters at the outstretched hand of Tagar

and asked, "Can you read?" Meetharam thought Tagar would ask him to read the letter. In that case, he could convey the news of Dharani's return to the village. When Tagar nodded and said, "Yes," he looked at her with a look of surprise and quickly stepped out of the house.

Tagar turned the envelope several times—looked at the address and opening the gate she came to the courtyard. She had received letters in the past but the handwriting in this letter she could not recall to have seen before. Like a luxuriant vegetation growing on the wet soil of summer even if the rains poured down only once, the letter brought many a feeling of apprehension in Tagar's mind. As someone who had spent most of her life in sorrow and anxiety, one whose smiles turned to tears in no time, it was natural for her to shiver even if the leaves fall from a tree. Out of the fear or being worried of the outcome, she did not have the heart to open the envelope. Slowly she tore the corner open—as if a stone pressing on her chest had been removed. First she saw the address—Brindavan. How many would not be thrilled or filled with emotion! The sweet memories of hundreds of years are woven with this name! Tagar read the signature at the end, without moving: Sri Badan Chandra Sarma. Tagar read the letter without change of breath and sat down in the open. She did not cry. Tears rolled down from her eyes. Kamali clasped her mother and stood like an image of stone. She was annoyed with Meetharam for having brought a letter which made her cry.

Bapuram Bora visited Kasi, Badrikashram, Badrinath and many places of pilgrimage and spent the last few months with Badan Chandra Sarma at Brindavan. He had been ailing for sometime. When he was told to inform his house, he said he had no close relatives. When he became very ill, he said that in the event of his death, information should be given to Tagar Kalitani through Dharani Kalita. He did not suffer much. He had

the name of the Lord on his lips till the last moment. The money which he had with him had been donated to Govindaji's temple as he had instructed. This was the gist of Badan Sarma's letter.

All the anger, disrespect for her father that had came from a sense of the wrong done to her vanished from Tagar's mind like a house on sand. For long Tagar had a feeling that her father would one day realise his mistake and come in search of her. Once again Tagar would be able to cry with her head on his lap. But the dream was shattered now.

Tagar sat motionless, her hand touching the forehead for long, crying till the evening, when she took to bed. Mother and daughter did not eat at all that night. Next day in the morning Tagar called Naoram Pandit, the Brahmin, to her house. She placed a chair for Pandit to sit on in the courtyard and gave him the news. Pandit said consoling her: "He had cast off his mortal body at Brindavan – is there a greater fortune? We do not have the means to take the ashes to the Ganga – your father's entire body is gone there. What a pure soul! This type of death even the gods may envy! No, it is wrong to cry at this time of joy."

The Pandit continued, "A daughter given away in marriage does not have much purification to undergo. Even then fasting when the parents or the elderly relatives die is good for the household. Let me have the letter. When did he die?"

Tagar put the letter on the floor. Pandit took it up, read it and said to himself: "On the seventh day of *Bohag*, Wednesday: Today, it is the twenty second day of *Bohag*." He calculated on the fingers. "Seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven—twenty two." As the calculation was over he looked up at Tagar and said, "Well, today is the sixteenth day. In case of death outside one's own land, there is provision for getting it all over in three days. Take it from me, your impurities are already gone. Wash your utensils and call some elders for a *naam*. It will be all right. There is no need to perform special rites to ward off evil."

She gave the horoscope of Dharani and Kamali to the Pandit to examine within the month of *Bohag*. The Pandit opened the horoscope keeping it on one side and the almanac on the other and started to look closely. Looking at Dharani's horoscope, he said, "The early part of the year seems good. He should be released in the month of *Bohag*."

Hearing the results of the calculations Tagar's face lit up with delight. His wrinkles now showing prominently, he said grimly, "Towards the end of the year—Saturn rules. Health will deteriorate. He will suffer greatly from sickness."

When Tagar looked up to him very sadly, the Pandit said, "Who does not suffer from sickness? There is disease, there is cure also. Offer a puja to the Goddess Kali of the South. Everything will be all right."

Tagar found that Pandit's prediction came true after a few days. News reached that Dharani has been released. But he was ill. He could not walk from the town. The jail officer had sent information to his home to send a bullock cart. Having received the message, Tagar entreated Sunod to arrange a bullock cart.

"Wait, how can you get a cart in the evening itself? We have a cart but bullocks are not there. There is no hood also. The 'Ronga' bullock has refused to eat for the last two days, ...remains so quiet."

"Will not Maghi agree to give his bullocks," Tagar asked softly, drawing her veil a bit.

"Why not? He will give. But who will take the cart?" "If the cart and the bullocks get arranged, Joigo, Bhedu's son, can be made to go." Tagar waited to see if Sunod would come up with a fresh objection.

"The well belongs to one. Another has the rope. The third one draws the water. All right, send message to Joigu. Let us ask

for Maghi's bullocks and take the cart. Let me get the hood ready. How can you make the sick man come during the mid-day without it?"

Tagar had doubts that Sunod would so easily lend the cart. Thinking that he might change his mind any moment, Tagar left for Bhedu's house as soon as Sunod assured her.

"Oh! One thing, do you hear? The bullocks will go for the whole night and will return tomorrow. Some arrangement has to be made for feeding them."

"How much?"

"Some thatch... also chaff. Joigu will also need to buy some edibles...and at least one rupee...."

Tagar waited for the exact reply with her head lowered.

"Will need three Rupees? Do you have?"

Tagar wished someone would bring Dharani flying by the night itself. Tagar knew well that once he was given the money, Sunod would hurry up to send the cart by the evening.

"I am bringing right now." Tagar rushed home with these words. When Tagar came back with the money, Sunod had already finished tying the hood. He had also put a new rope. Joigu came with Maghi's bullocks straight from the field and readied the cart.

Human life is like child's play. It builds but breaks soon after. One time it is up and then down again. One smiles, one cries also. Tagar dreamt a dream that night: amid the joy and sorrow, she is making a world of her own.

ELEVEN

The government hospital at Roha is a boon for the people of the neighbouring villages. It was truly a place of succor. Villages used to come here in ever increasing number for the treatment of the common diseases that prevailed in the countryside. It could be anything from ringworm to goiter and dyspepsia. Most mothers go there for an untroubled childbirth, the old for the cataract in the eye.

The hospital for most villagers was a living wonder. The harbinger of sorrow for some, of joy and relief for others. One could discover here the hopes of dawn over the horizon as well as the shadows of sunset and twilight. It provided the kindness of a mother and the love of a wife for her husband. One could also see the suffering, the wages of sin of a previous birth. A world, living yet imperfect, of hopes and disappointment was built around the four walls of the hospital.

It was six months since Dr. Golap Barua had come on transfer to the hospital. He was a straightforward and cheerful man. Unlike his proud predecessor, proud or reticent of speech, he used to greet whoever came there with a cheering smile and words of welcome. He did not insist on payment of fees when he used to go out to see patients outside, and instances are not

rare, when he had paid from his own pocket for proper treatment of the patient. Once he prescribed medicines for someone he would make frequent enquiries daily till the complete recovery of the patient. He would never feel that the frequency of the visits would reduce his importance in any way. On the contrary, he felt that the frequency of the visits kept up the morale of the family and helped the patients to get well in double-quick time.

Medicines are scarce in a rural hospital. The Quinine stock had got exhausted: The doctor had written to the civil surgeon: he had a telegram sent but still there was no chance of a fresh stock arriving before the rainy season was over. It was a familiar sight to see the women and children surrounding the hospital even before the shutters were open: they carried bottles of varying sizes, usually blue or red to fill up with the medicines already prescribed. This would go on till evening. Patients trudged a long distance on foot: others sent someone on their behalf. Why should they come when someone told them that there was no medicine in the hospital? Having no other way out, the doctor since he did not have Quinine started giving to the patients a local herbal preparation which had efficacy to control the disease.

The chemist, Mahendra, was not at all happy at this increase in his work load. Doctors in the past used to keep the dispensing room closed if there were no medicines: they used to open it at 8 A.M. in the morning and 4 P.M. in the evening dutifully closing it at 12 Noon and then at 6 P.M. The doctor worked as if he would keep it open day and night. The chemist was annoyed because the herbal medicine took so much more time in making it: he had to pound the herb, boil it and then put the measured doses in bottles for use in the morning. Other government employees got overtime allowance but he did not get anything for the extra work done by him. Let the doctor work as much as he liked for currying favour with the public or

expanding his private practice. But then why was he making him slog?

It was past six o'clock. The sun was still there because it was summer time. There was still a good number of visitors waiting for medicines. They were almost surrounding the doctor, who was making queries about each person and as they replied he went on writing down the prescriptions one after the other. When the atmosphere became a bit suffocating because there were so many in a small room the doctor administered a quick rebuke which made them disperse or spread out temporarily. But none seemed to really bother as each person was eager to take his or her prescription at the earliest.

Constant writing had made the doctor's writing finger numb. He stopped for a while, opened his shirt buttons to allow air to pass and sat down on the chair. To relieve the fatigue, he looked for the hookah only to find that there was no tobacco and there was nothing but a slight smell: a small comfort even then.

Seeing the doctor resting in relaxed comfort some young men who had come and were waiting there were provoked to remark, "Look at him! He is a government servant and this hospital is built with public money and yet how he behaves!" Some of them resolved to report on his behaviour to the Civil Surgeon and to the Assamese newspaper: They continued grumbling till the doctor attended to them and gave them the necessary prescription for medicines. Some of these young men becoming restive dashed towards the doctor's table and the doctor being annoyed or pretending to be so stopped writing. Silence descended on the room immediately. Most of them looked towards the doctor wistfully as if to make amends. The doctor saw the pathetic look on the face of a boy standing in front crying and took up the pen again and asked, "What is your name? What is your complaint? How long? Your age?" The

rapid-fire questions unnerved the boy who muttered, "It is fifty", meaning his father's age and not his and the doctor mistook him for making fun and admonished him roundly. He passed on to the others asking the very same questions and getting them recorded in the register. The boy, unnerved and wavering at the sharp admonishment did not know what to say at first but when his eyes met the doctor's, he mustered courage to say, "Doctor Babu, I am not unwell. It is my father who is sick."

Another person whose prescription the doctor was now writing remarked, "Why don't you say that, boy? The boss has no time to lose, you are making it worse." The speaker looked back to elicit support from the others. Hearing the praise so gratuitously offered, the doctor tried to divert attention by saying in good humour, "Look look, this boy says he is fifty," and the gathering had a good laugh. The faces of the patients too brightened up for a moment. One of them looked sternly at the boy. "Are not you Bhedo's son," he asked. The boy nodded implying that his guess was not wrong. "When did Bhedo become fifty-year-old," he asked again and looking towards Mitharam asked him, "Are not you of his age?"

"Yes. Most certainly."

"Tell me then, what is you age?"

"Why should I? Why should one keep count of the years?"

Before he could finish even, the man picked up his prescription from the hand of the doctor and came out pushing others aside. The void created by his leaving was quickly filled up by Mitharam who advanced towards the doctor's table.

The chemist was beside himself with rage for the doctor for continuing to prescribe medicines till so late in the day. He could not restrain himself and said, "Doctor Babu, please stop for today. The dose marks have become invisible in the dark." He then addressed those who were waiting directly, "Please go

home. No more today. This is not a grocery shop to be kept open till midnight." He closed the window of the dispensing room violently to give the impression that the dispensary had been finally closed for the day.

Doctor said, "Yes, I am winding up," but he wrote three more prescriptions and then finally kept the register aside. Those who did not get the prescription for some reason came out weary and frustrated. As others left the room, a small girl approached the doctor.

A very thin girl, about seven-year-old. The ribs were almost transparent but innocence was writ large on her face. She was wearing clean clothes with hair curling and parted at the top falling on both sides of her face. In the background of the twilight, the face indicated a deep sadness. "Come come," said the doctor reassuring the girl. She stood up on the right side of the doctor's chair.

"Give me your hand," the doctor said and after examining the pulse beat, stroked her belly which was bulging like a jack fruit. Taking the bottle from the girl he shouted at the chemist, "Mahendra, take the bottle and give her castor oil. Do you have Quinine?"

The chemist scrubbing the table was about to close the cupboard and replied promptly, "No, it is already out of stock. I have been pressing you to give indent more than once if you remember." As soon as he saw the girl coming out to take the bottle, he remarked, "She is the daughter of Dharani master," and he said directly to the girl, "Your mother did not find time to send you the whole day. Go now, take t tomorrow whatever you want." The chemist came out with a bundle of keys in his hand. He did not give the castor oil as directed by the doctor. The doctor too did not insist. He asked the girl to carry his hookah and to proceed with him to his quarter which was

adjacent to the rear side of the hospital. As the doctor gave his hookah to the girl to carry, the girl was happy, taking it as a gesture of his affection and sympathy.

The girl was too careful lest the long pipe fell from her hand; the doctor looked back to see if she was able to carry it along the stairs without difficulty. He could not check his smile finding that the unfailing companion of his bachelor days was held so carefully close to her chest by the small girl. To remove the feeling of apprehension from her mind and to put her at ease, the doctor asked:

"What's your name?"

"Kamali," she replied with a smile.

"Oh, my daughter's name is also Kamali."

The doctor became a bit grave, thinking about something. Next moment, he fondled the girl tenderly with affection to remove a certain worry from his mind. He said, "Good good, when my Kamali comes both of you can become friends."

Kamali, shy and diffident still, quietly nodded.

TWELVE

It was the doctor's habit to relax and unwind himself once he was out of the hospital after finishing his daily schedule of work. His servant Saona always placed the chairs and table on the porch before the doctor reached home. The doctor asked Kamali to keep the hookah aside he spread himself on an arm chair keeping his feet on a stool in front and took a deep breath. The accumulated fatigue of the day vanished in no time.

Saona did not wait for the doctor's directions but made the tobacco ready and also passed on a fan to the doctor. As the doctor was moving the fan slowly, Kamali came up to him and said, "Doctor Babu, give me the fan. Let me blow the air for you."

The doctor pretended to be angry and said, "Poor girl, I am no doctor Babu at home. You call me *deuta* here at home."

Not being able to fathom the difference, Kamali stared at the doctor for a little while. Doctor was tempted to allow her to blow the fan to give him comfort but seeing her thin hands he hesitated. He said, "Little girl, how can you blow the fan for me?" But Kamali, intent on proving herself before the doctor, said, "Why not? I always blow the fan for my father."

Doctor gave the fan to Kamali and rested himself quietly by closing the eyes as if in deep thought. Kamali moved the fan vigorously standing behind the doctor's armchair. Saona brought the hookah and put the pipe on the doctor's mouth to draw the air in. The doctor coughed after a few puffs and asked his servant to bring the medicine box and the blue medicine bottle and then turning towards Kamali he asked, "Who are there at your home, Kamali."

"Father and mother."

"Don't you have a brother?"

"No," she said shaking her head.

"What does your father do? Cultivation?"

Dharani was a weaving instructor in the village but every one called him Dharani Master. Kamali was very pleased to speak about her father. She said, "He was a weaving instructor earlier but he has been bed-ridden since he was released from prison."

"Prison? For what," the doctor asked in amazement. "Did he commit theft," he asked.

Kamali waited for a moment and replied almost in protest, "Why should he commit theft? He was caught by the police because he was a Congress volunteer."

Doctor was ashamed that he made an insinuation against a patriot. Avoiding the unpleasant question, the doctor asked, "What is the matter with your father? What is he suffering from?"

"Fever and cough."

Kamali became less sprightly once she began speaking of her father's illness. The fan moved slower in her hand now. It was not a proper thing to go to prison, Kamali learnt that from her class mates in school. Mandal's daughter in their neighbourhood always teased her and cracked jokes at her expense because of this but more than that she thought that the

doctor might refuse to examine her father because he had been to jail. She felt sad and depressed.

"How long has he been sick?"

"Since the day he was released from jail."

Doctor understood that Kamali was still not able to keep count of days in a month. How could she? She was still at the stage of learning the alphabets.

"Has he been taking medicines?"

"He was treated by Kandarpa Kaviraj earlier. But since there was no improvement, he has given up taking medicines. His coughing has increased during the last few days. That is why mother has sent me to you."

Doctor just said 'yes' and finding no hopeful answer Kamali became very sad, tears welling up in her eyes.

In the mean time Saona brought the medicine box and the doctor straightened himself and looking at it said, "You did not bring the bottle. It's on the table. Please go again and bring it."

Saona has been working as a servant of the doctor for long. It was four years since the doctor's wife died. His wife had trained Saona for all household work. He was just a boy when he came. Since then he had been growing up with the doctor. The doctor had developed a kind of indifference to worldly matters since his wife expired. His only daughter was staying with her uncle, he had hardly any worldly obligations. Saona was well acquainted with the doctor's whimsical nature. Outside his hospital he may not be called 'doctor' but Saona had observed that his relationship with the patients and medicines continued even when he was at his home.

"All right, I shall bring it. I have placed a towel and *dhoti* in the bath room. Kindly go for change now." On his way to bring the bottle, Saona grumbled, "He brings the hospital home. This habit he will never give up."

The doctor made a Quinine dose ready. "Let him take it after food at bed time," he told Kamali. "I shall give some

purgative in the bottle. To be taken on empty stomach. Let him take a little boiled rice for lunch. Nothing more was required to be done."

After some time the doctor asked a bit casually, "Can you go home alone," Kamali laughed at his fear and said, "Do you think our home is very far? I can reach it running all the way. It is near the tree adjacent to Narayan Mandal's house."

As asked by the doctor Saona brought two bananas which the doctor gave to Kamali and said, "Don't take the tablets with molasses but take it with a banana." But Saona knew that the bananas were not given as medicine. It was the doctor's habit not to show any affection openly. Saona apprehending that the doctor might ask him to escort the girl to her house explained that Dharani's house was close to the house of Narayan Mandal. "Yes, that is where exactly our house is," said Kamali.

"Then your house is near the turn of the road," Saona pointed to a direction which was quite near. Looking towards the doctor, Saona said, "Deuta, you might recall that the other day I brought the fruits from that the same tree very near to their house." Not waiting for the doctor to reply, Saona told Kamali, "It is not yet evening. Why should you have any fear? Go ahead. I am looking out from here."

"Certainly I can go alone." Kamali made a dash for her house.

Saona picked up the medicine box and the bottle and entered inside. Doctor now reclined fully on the armchair. The cool evening breeze removed the last traces of physical tiredness and his mind and body were touched with a tranquil feeling. He studied medicine to be happy and to have mental peace. But his preoccupations in life hardly gave any scope of happiness or peace. Quite often disease, death, pain and poverty performed a fiendish dance all around him.

THIRTEEN

The haze created by continuous drizzle prevented the sun from coming out in full blaze. It was the month of *Ahar*, the rainy season was at its peak. From time to time, farmers were seen driving the unwilling bullocks to the paddy field. Seeing the doctor cycling his way early in the morning, one of the villagers going by the road spoke to him, "My respects, sir. Where are you off to so early?"

"I have to go to a place nearby," the doctor said and did not give him chance to ask a second question.

"Some one must be very ill," Nalia, trying to stoke the fire on a bundle of thatch remarked to a passerby on the road.

"Oh, this has become a cursed village. Last night, Fesu's youngest son died."

"Why is that poor woman still alive? Lost her two sons in one year! So unfortunate!!"

Maghi joined in from behind. "Bhedo's son is not at all in good condition and about to collapse at any time."

"If something happens to the son, the family is sunk really" said Nalia scratching his body below the waist.

"Need you say this," Maghi said. She removed a leech that was coming up as high as her thigh and threw it down on the

road. Nalia glanced back to say: "It is bleeding so much. Put some soil, it will stop instantly. This year leeches have multiplied. May be, there will be a severe flood this year." He drove the bullocks to the field and others followed him.

Tagar was scrubbing the courtyard early in the morning when the ringing of a cycle bell disturbed her attention: she looked up and saw a gentleman riding on a cycle dressed in a coat and trousers stopping there. Tagar was a bit alarmed at first taking him to be a police officer. Drawing her upper garment over her face she stood motionless for a while. The doctor turned his face sideways as it was not good manners to look at a lady straight in the face. The woman had a dignified look, appeared to be from a middle class background which dire poverty had not been able to put into shade completely. The fire of youth was no longer there but the restrained beauty of motherhood was clearly to be seen. The doctor had rung the bell so that she was not caught unaware of a stranger's presence. He spoke first: "Is it not the home of Dharani Master? Kamali brought a purgative yesterday. I forgot to tell her that she should take plenty of warm water with it and that is why I decided to come and tell her. Otherwise, she could develop stomach ache."

Hearing the bell Kamali came out running out of curiosity. She could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the doctor standing in front of their gate. "Please come in," she fervently pleaded. The doctor smiled seeing that Kamali was so enthusiastic. Tagar was still not able to understand it all and stared at her daughter vacantly. Kamali took her hand over the doctor's cycle and said, "Sir gave me medicines yesterday. I called him to see father."

"Kamali, bring the chair for the doctor babu," Tagar said.

The doctor was relieved to hear Tagar giving direction to Kamali. It was the established convention for the doctors in

general that none would see a patient unless duly entrusted to do so: this was the problem he was thinking about. He had already alienated a few quacks and practitioners in the neighbourhood. "She entreated so much yesterday," the doctor said, "to come and see her ailing father. Little girl she is so cute! Did she take her medicines in the morning?"

"Yes, she took it early in the morning. She woke me up early, very early indeed fearing that otherwise she would be late in taking the medicines."

The doctor remarked: "Oh, poor girl!"

"She has been suffering for so long. But you need not worry. It is thread worm only. Please don't let her eat too much sweet."

Kamali placing the chair said, "I have told my father everything about you. He calls you inside." The doctor sat down promptly. Keeping his sun hat on his knee and looking around, the doctor spoke showing sympathy, "Please don't speak of this captive country! The patriots are forced to undergo so much suffering! We have experienced it in our own family too - many of my near and dear ones have been rendered destitute because they are fighting for the country's freedom." This was the best way, the doctor thought, he could convey his sympathies to Kamali's mother.

"How long did he serve in jail? He went to jail before I joined here, I suppose."

"Yes, he was sentenced for two years. He has been released because of ill health without serving the full term."

"What about medicines?"

"Kandarpa Kaviraj treated him in the beginning. For last two days he is taking recourse to nature therapy."

"Did you bring any medicine from the dispensary?"

The doctor did not wait for the answer but hastened to add, "Oh, I know there is a boycott of medicines from the

government hospital. If it is really so, then we have no business to be here."

Tagar feared that the doctor might leave without examining her husband; she was about to cry and started pleading with him, "Please do not think of what has already happened, we have learnt a lesson, being made to suffer all these months." She said wiping a tear from her eye. The doctor hurried to say, "Why do you lament? Have not you heard of Dr. Golap Barua? He is after the patient if the patient is not after him." Looking towards Kamali, he said, "Kamali, take me to your father."

The doctor without waiting for Tagar entered the room. Pleasantly surprised by the doctor's manner of addressing her in a dignified manner, Tagar was reminded of old days. She followed the doctor into the room.

FOURTEEN

The small room was neat and clean. A feminine touch was everywhere to be seen. A famous picture of the Mahatma Gandhi with his hand resting on his chin was on the wall, a few books were kept on the table: a tin chair was nearby.

A man reduced almost to a skeleton lay on the bed, with a Khadi shawl spread over his body. He was Dharani master. The almost lifeless body seemed to have a pair of alert eyes – as if he was waiting for something.

Getting inside the room with confident steps, the doctor said, "What master! You are not willing to take medicines from the government dispensary? Do you want to boycott foreign medicines along with foreign clothes? You seem to be the perfect Gandhian."

The doctor had a hearty laugh saying this and Kamali laughed too although the meaning of what the doctor said was not clear to her. There was a faint glimmer of a smile on the thin face of the skeleton-like body. Seeing her husband smile after ages, Tagar's face lit up with a fleeting sense of happiness. Not waiting for anybody, the doctor pulled the chair to near the sick bed and examined the patient. Dharani welcomed the doctor with a smile. Doctor guessed the nature of the sickness Dharani

was suffering from as soon as the symptoms were described to him. The look of the patient deepened his impression. Notwithstanding the sincere nursing of his devoted wife and the doctor's medicines, Dharani could only have a few days to live on this earth: the moment he had this the impression the face of the doctor was engulfed in a kind of grim despair. He became enraged at the apathy of the authorities that resulted in the detention in jail of the healthy and the spread of tuberculosis amongst them.

"Please give me your hand," saying this the doctor himself took Dharani's hand and kept it on the bed, took out the thermometer, shook it and placed it under the armpit for recording the body temperature. The doctor asked, "Does it pain when you cough?"

"Yes, when the cough is constant, I feel out of breath."

"Is there much sweating at night?"

"Yes. Too much. The clothes get wet. I have to change it at night."

"Yes," said the doctor and asked the thermometer to be taken out.

He saw the temperature as recorded and put the thermometer inside his pocket. He then took out the stethoscope. Many quacks thrive in the countryside and prosper with the help of this instrument. The doctor examined the patient with it, placing it on both sides of the body.

Tagar and Kamali watched the doctor's examination with bated breath. That the doctor did not neglect them because they were so poor filled them with a sense of gratitude. Removing the stethoscope and putting the clothes and the blanket in proper position the doctor sat down. He had inferred correctly about Dharani's sickness. Tagar and Kamali were waiting eagerly to know about his opinion.

Not displaying any sign of his actual state of mind but still showing his artificial anger, the doctor said, "Why did you not inform me so long? You wanted to remain in bed comfortably, isn't it? No more of that any more. I have seen through your trick."

Reassuring words of the doctor brought a fresh ray of hope all around. Tagar and Dharani had brightened faces as if touched by the morning sunrise.

Dr. Golap Barua believed that many ailments could be cured if the patient could be kept cheerful. Standing near the door while coming out, the doctor asked, "What have you given him to eat?"

"He does not want to take anything. I give him rice if there is no temperature. Otherwise, he takes milk and soft rice."

"How can you go according to the dictates of the patient? I know you are as much an expert in cooking as in nursing him."

Tagar bowed down her head in shyness and diffidence. The doctor's continuous shaking of his head while speaking which was an old habit with him and the stethoscope moving to and from on his neck made Kamali laugh in amusement.

"From today onwards, it will not be what he likes or does not like. Please come near. I shall explain to you."

Tagar came near. The doctor listed the do's and don'ts carefully on his fingers, "Milk in the morning, rice and fish curry for an early lunch – also eggs if you can give. Milk again in the afternoon and night meal should again consist of milk or milk with rice if he feels hungry enough. Can you give him plenty of milk every day?"

"I get a seer in our home itself but will he take?"

"What do I hear, master," the doctor said pretending to frown at the patient.

Dharani spoke slowly, "I do not like milk at all, feel like vomiting. But still..."

"Don't say but. It is good luck that you have the milk. You are in politics – a patriot who would like the people in the villages to come up and imagine dreams about their future. But you should know that the doctor and medicine alone cannot restore good health. There should be good, nutritious food: health then will improve automatically."

Staying a little while, he said in a commanding tone:

"Do not object to taking of milk from now on. If you cannot take it in one gulp, take slowly, several times."

"All right," Dharani replied slowly.

"Are bowels clear everyday?"

"Not always. Sometimes not at all."

"That will not go so easily. You have this *bel* fruit tree near your house. Get its juice mixed with milk and take it, the bowels will be clear. You are a patriot no doubt but you have forgotten the good old recipes for health of our own land."

Standing near the courtyard Doctor asked Kamali to bring water to wash his hands. Kamali poured the water from a jug and having finished washing, the doctor asked, "Did you take the medicine Kamali or just threw it away?" Kamali just smiled and went inside and as the doctor put the stethoscope inside the pocket, Tagar came with a tray in hand, which had on it a hand-woven towel and a rupee coin meant for him.

"Oh, you have not forgotten the doctor's fees either," said the doctor as he picked up the rupee and the *gamosa*. Seeing the doctor accept it, Tagar mustered courage enough to ask: "How did you find him?"

"There is no need to worry. Let him take the medicines. He should be alright in a few days."

"What are the medicines?"

"You need not worry about that. There will be a few injections. A bottle of medicine has to be bought from the town. I shall send one bottle today. Four times daily. But please remember more than medicines he needs nursing."

Looking at his wrist watch the doctor said, "It's quite late. Today is Tuesday. The day for injections." Doctor picked up the hat and put it on and then he left riding his cycle. Kamali was bringing betelnut but the doctor was gone by that time.

Like nature turning out to be more pleasant soon after the harshness of winter, the sudden visit of the doctor revived the family and enlivened it somewhat with the touch of spring. The morning sun threw its generous rays all round the patient's room. The scent of fresh blossoms filled the room. The sincerity of the doctor and his abundant affection and sympathy quietly brought in an aura of a new beginning. Hopes emerged of change for the better, of a new deal for tomorrow.

FIFTEEN

After seeing the doctor off, Tagar completed the sweeping of the courtyard and then went to the cowshed to milk the cow. The *mugi* cow gave more milk than usual but Tagar did not try to take more as the calf was too young. She gave the milk to Kamali asking her to boil it properly. She gave some stalks of hay to the cow and having finished her work in the cowshed, she took a bucket of water and came over to her husband's room. Dharani was keen to know what was the medicine that the doctor had prescribed and as soon as she saw Tagar entering the room, he asked, "What did the doctor say?" "He had given more stress on your diet," Tagar replied. She put her hand under Dharani's head to lift it slowly and make him sit on his bed. Reclining his head and washing it dry with a towel, he asked, "Did he not give medicines?" Dharani was partly apprehensive that being a government doctor he might not prescribe medicines thinking that Dharani would not take it.

"He will himself send a bottle of medicines. You will need a few injections also."

Even though Dharani did not have much faith in the medicine given by the government, he had no doubt about the efficacy of the injections. About ten years back, Kalazar broke

out in Roha taking a heavy toll. Frequently, it was controlled by administering injections to those who were affected. Confident in his belief that the injections would cure him, Dharani slept peacefully.

Kamali boiled the milk as she used to do every day: she brought a glass of milk to her father. On other days Dharani used to feel like vomiting when the milk was brought to him and he would drink it only after a lot of persuasion. This time he drank the glass of milk without a murmur and having finished doing so heaved a deep sigh.

Tagar changed his dress and holding him tight by the shoulder made him lie down on the bed. Placing a freshly washed shawl over him, Tagar came out with the bucket and the pitcher. She took the clothes for washing and went to the tank for her bath. The old tank had shrunk becoming a narrow channel, hedged in on all sides. Dharani's forefathers used to drink water from that very tank. Tagar washed the clothes and spread it for drying in the sun and after bathing it the tank came in with a pitcher of water.

A small corner near the kitchen was kept by Tagar as a place for the deity duly sanctified by daily prayer and worship. A picture of Lord Krishna playing the flute which Tagar brought from her house long ago was kept there: there was the hymn book, the *Kirtana*, the sacred scripture of a devout Vaishnava. Tagar used to have the earthen lamp lit there morning and evening and offered her prayer before the deity. Occasionally when she was in a happy mood, she would recite a few lines from the *Kirtana*: on auspicious days like the New Year's day or the Bihu day, she would place the sacred offerings before the deity. Sometimes when she saw a bad dream or dreamt of someone near and dear falling sick, she would place a few coins and shed a silent tear in a mood of prayer and submission. Keeping the

water jar nearby, changing her clothes, Tagar wiped clean the platform of the deity and then kneeling down before the picture of Krishna with the flute, she hummed a few lines from the *Kirtana*:

*You are the witness
You are the soul
You are the Inner Me
I bow down before you
Being the helpless one
I seek your help only
You can rescue me
From the thrall of desire
No more suffering
Can I endure*

As Tagar prayed, tears rolled down her eyes but quickly she wiped the tears and offered her prayerful homage to the creator. Having finished her worship, Tagar came out from that corner to resume her household work.

Once the kitchen fire was lit, she thought of what she was going to cook for the day. On other days she hardly bothered, going near the oven she wondered what her husband would like to have for dinner. Some fragrant soft rice is still in store, it is better to cook this rice today: Kamali could take this rice, it will be good for her. Chakumudi did not come today. Had she been here, there could have been a steaming fish curry. Of course, there is still time for her to come. As she was thinking of the fish seller woman, Chakumudi arrived right in front of her and said, "You are already in the kitchen today. Are you buying some fish?" Tagar replied, "Wait, *Bai*, I am coming. Good of you to have come right in time."

"I have brought some fresh fish, so I thought I would come to you. Tilo Bapu told me about the doctor's visit. I would know

what the doctor said if I come to you, I thought". "Good," Tagar said, "You have done right. If you do not show your concern for us, who will? Keep some *Kaaoi* fish for today. Take cash or rice in exchange but later. I am busy in the kitchen today." "All right, as you like. I have been selling fish to this house for two generations. My money will be safe here. You have come from a faraway place. That's why probably you do not consider us that close."

Chakumudi picked up the fishes and gave her. When she was about to go, she turned to Tagar and asked, "What did the doctor say?" "Injections will cure him, he said," Tagar spoke more out of her own conviction.

"Oh dear! Get the injections quickly. God will help you. There is none who does not love your husband in this part of the land. The widows of Katoni village are restive since they came to know of his illness. All right, then, let me go." She proceeded calling loudly to the other neighbours to come and buy fish from her.

Kamali helped Tagar get the fish ready for cooking. Tagar as was her habit did not like to kill live fish, Kamali did it for her. Kamali was in an uncommonly good mood because it was she who called the doctor home. Her father should be recovering fully within a few days. The doctor was such a goodman. He had no vanity at all. He spoke to everyone so cheerfully. Taking a fish on her hand Tagar asked Kamali, "Your father likes gourd, is not it?" Kamali said, "Yes, yes I know. There are so many hanging atop in Kopahi's backward." Kamali got ready to go and get one of these then and there. Tagar said "No need, you are having loose motion today. You need not roam around in other's backyard."

Kamali was annoyed at what the mother said. She was not able to understand why her mother was so keen to deprive her father of what he liked best. She imagined how her father's face would brighten up once he was served with his favourite

vegetable. Kamali went out in search of it and reached the backyard of Mandal where it was growing in such abundance. Over the boundary fence the thickly growing creepers formed a kind of hedge, over which the gourds, not one two but many and many more were growing all over. Kamali who could not resist the temptation of plucking just one or two thought that it would suffice for the day and she would take more tomorrow if necessary. But a few ripe ones caught her eye and she thought aloud, "Oh! God! There they are so big" and moved on in search of more. It was at this time that the Mandal's two daughters Kopahi and Sonpahi observed her and they were very much excited; they pretended to be deeply outraged at what they declared as the little girl's act of pilferage and they cried together, "Oh! She has taken out everything, the thief, the thief!" Normally these two were so vigilant that nobody dared to touch even a betelnut leaf in Mandal's orchard. Kopahi climbed over their boundary fence to take back what Kamali had collected but failed. She started hurling abuses on the girl, who was, in the meantime, squatting on the floor answering to her call of nature. Kopahi cursed the little girl selecting the choicest abuses, "You who have eaten up your own father's skull are bent on ruining us now" and so on. She made a ball out of clay and threw it in the direction of Kamali and when it hit the ground just in front of the little girl, both the sisters laughed raucously.

Kamali stood up, feeling a bit lost and sad. On other days she would have brought the stolen vegetables even if she were abused. This time, she threw the vegetables away and slowly moved out.

"My mother prohibited me today to come here because she knew that I would be abused. My father's illness will be worse if he takes these cursed vegetables." The little girl's mind woke up to her mother's deep affection for her and her own concern for the good of the family.

SIXTEEN

Rains in summer are like a poor relation in a rich man's house: they both prolong their sojourn to the chagrin of all, who welcomed them initially. In the months of *Ahar* and *Shravan* rains are needed but the excess of it does no good. Trees, plants and vegetation grow luxuriantly but it is like a bride over-decorated with ornaments: they repel rather than attract the eye. The rain god Varuna fills up every river, lake, stream to the brim: his kindness is given equally to every nook and corner of this moist earth. One could hear the sounds of welcoming the unbounded gift of nature and its acceptance with open arms. A sense of equality dawns everywhere, which is felt by every living creature, from the croaking frog to the tiniest of insects moving about in the earth.

After pouring incessantly for days, the rain god in a brief respite was perhaps feeling a bit drowsy. The morning's face was becoming crystal clear, a deep blue veil was hanging over it, and there was a red vermilion mark on its broad forehead.

The strong sunshine made the women hurry up and perform their daily chores with quickened steps. The leaking roof damaged the floor of the house, some were working on it, others were cleaning up the rubbish that had gathered throwing it outside.

Some women were spreading the paddy on the floor of the courtyard after cleansing it of mud or particles of dust. Some others were busy washing. Still others had brought out their looms to clean up the accumulated moss and make it ready for weaving. Everywhere the accent was on taking full advantage of the sunny interval. Everyone had realised the difference that sunshine made to everyone's life.

The doctor's treatment brought about a drastic improvement in Dharani's health. He was able to walk all by himself. As the weather was clear, he was sitting in the courtyard on an arm chair. Tagar was arranging her daughter's hair sitting nearby. The sun had come out after many days of continuous rain, and around noon it was becoming quite unbearable. A cool breeze was blowing in the afternoon. Dharani's eyes were fixed on the mango tree near the kitchen. The mango tree had retained so much of Dharani's boyhood memories. He recalled how he with his friend Mihiram plucked the mangoes before it was time and his mother chastising them sternly. Mihiram, Konpai, Rajen were his companions in his boyhood adventures in the village; they were in the habit of roaming about once the school examinations were over, often going into the sugarcane fields. They used to break open the fence and take sugarcane from these fields stealthily. Similarly they often took the fishes entrapped in the net laid by others and when their mothers asked about it, they used to say that they had caught those. How many times they rode the white horse that belonged to Dharmeswar Gohain.

Dharani began to recall his boyhood friends one by one: he could recollect the names of just one or two, the rest escaped his memory. He cast a yearning glance and a disappointed look towards the sky. The sky, then richly hued like the feathers of a peacock appeared to be smiling in delight. It was the evening sun, the colours white, blue and red, mixed up with myriad other

patterns seemed to open the way on an infinite land of magic and mystery. Dharani's eyes followed the wandering cloud as far as he could. He became impatient to speak to the distant cloud on the horizon.

Since he was almost listless for sometime, Tagar thought him to be sleeping. She pulled the shawl over his feet quietly without waking him up. Dharani was still asleep. Tagar rearranged her daughter's hair and told her, "Go, take a walk. But please take care not to have any dust on your head." Then she came near Dharani and placed her hand on his forehead. There were signs of sweating on his forehead. As Tagar wiped the sweat with the towel, Dharani awoke up as if from a day dream. Tagar, quite surprised asked him, "What are you looking at so intently? Are not you feeling well?" Tagar shivered as she uttered the sentence. He has come out after four months – what if he again falls ill, she thought. A voice from the armchair came through:

"I am alright, even a little better today." Tagar let her shawl slip down a bit and sighed in relief:

"You want to know what I am thinking ? I am thinking of the beautiful wisps of cloud of the sky, where have they come from, where are they going to? Do they also know death and life? Do they become dead when they leave the ken of our eyes? Perhaps they are assuming a new form remaining playfully in another sky."

Dharani's heart is welling up with emotion today. Quite unconsciously his mind was stirred and he almost spoke at times in the language of poetry. In order to remove the thought of death from his mind Tagar asked, "I have made a new sweet pudding today. Would you like to taste it?" The fingers touched and conversed for sometime. At the end, Dharani spoke slowly, "Your touch... so pleasant it is! Yes, I shall take the pudding later on, not now." Tagar continued to fondle his hair with care.

Looking up to the sky, Dharani said, "Are you afraid of death ? You did not even like to pronounce the word at all ? But is there really any escape from it ? This is the greatest truth of life and do you think it will remain away if you do not discuss it ? Like children covering their face to keep the darkness of the night away."

"Life and death are the realities of life. Why need you discuss these matters just to feel depressed," Tagar's breast trembled with an uncertain sense of dread.

"One has to discuss if only to make death bearable or appealing even. Previous knowledge makes it so easy. For instance, both of us know each other so intimately now, we are getting more and more attached to each other now. That's how you can endure so much for my sake."

Tagar was embarrassed hearing her own praise from her husband. Since the day she came to Dharani's house, she had been doing everything in her power to make everyone happy and had borne the extremities of trial and suffering gladly. Notwithstanding what she had been doing all through, Tagar could never take possession of her husband as much or in the way, she would have liked to. Every time she wanted to enter the innermost core of her husband's heart through her love something inside her seemed to stand in the way offering resistance. It is a hint of something, a memory not yet dimmed that would prevent her from doing so. It came in the form of a commotion in her heart.

From the day Dharani had been out of jail, Tagar had been trying to give her love in abundance: she was always in deep earnest, remembering what has been enjoined by the sacred book on a married woman. Moreover the love which was denied to her so long took, it seemed, complete possession of her, reawakening herself in the process: it was if not anything an adequate recompense for all the loss of the years gone. She

spared no efforts to rebuild within him the power of love, which was gradually being eroded. But the debit side had increased so much in relation to what was on credit that she would hardly be able to redress the balance: she could not think of repaying the loan but only of the interest that had accrued. That was what she had come to realise.

When she recalled the sorrows of the past years a solitary tear moistened her eyes and a drop fell on Dharani's forehead. Trying to hide the commotion in her heart, Tagar pleaded with Dharani, "Please do not speak like this. Why should you contemplate death while thinking of our relationship."

Dharani thought Tagar had misunderstood what he said : "Why do you cry ? I have made the comparison only to make it clear enough."

Dharani wanted to speak on but Tagar putting her hand over his forehead said "No, No, don't speak. You might get unwell again".

"My life I spent like a fish caught in the net, being subject to all the illnesses of body and mind. I kept on shuffling from place to place, I could hardly give any thought to my wife's happiness. The cup of bitterness is full. It was so heartless on my part."

Dharani was filled with a deep sense of resentment which took the shape of a deep, revulsion for himself. Tagar spoke hesitantly to console her husband. "Why do you always think of your sense of duty only? You inflict pain on yourself. Why, I have my own duties too. You never speak about that. Life is worship for man and for woman it is total dedication for his sake – the scriptures mention this too. The wife will devote entirely to household duties and keep the husband away from all the turmoil. This is the law. Anyway, forget about those trifles and try to concentrate on getting well quickly."

Tagar passed her hand over her husband's face affectionately trying to drive away the disturbing thoughts from his mind. Keeping his hand on Tagar's, Dharani said in a sad tone: "Tagar, more the days pass, I am growing to be in love with life. I did not know before there was stored in this world so much love, so much affection for me. I like to think of all this abundant joy, happiness and love which appear to the created and kept reserved for me and me alone. A bowl of sweet rice is placed before the child, someone snatches it when he is about to taste it, the child sulks – I have the same feeling of being given everything and also being deprived of everything." Dharani sighed deeply and with a forlorn look was almost like a helpless child as he spoke: "Whatever you do, however much you try, I feel I may have to go tearing the bond of affection that holds us together."

The last flicker of a hope, the uncontrollable urge to go on living which so much marks the face of a man dying of a terminal illness like tuberculosis appeared quite unmistakably on Dharani's face. Like the flutter of the wings of a bird the see-saw rhythm of life and death together shook Dharani's mind. Finding that the long conversation had hardly calmed his mind, Tagar said: "It is almost evening prayer time now. Let me first bring snacks for you." She kept Dharani's outstretched hand with care on his lap and quietly walked away.

Sun, about to set was still lingering on the western horizon. Dharani thought of the unseen bond of love that held together the sun and the moon, the entire solar system and all the creation – his mind was filled with so much gratitude that tears were rolling down from his eyes.

SEVENTEEN

Since he came home after his release from jail, Dharani has been staying in his mother's room. He had not allowed Tagar to sleep with him despite her insistence. Of course, Tagar used to stir herself out of bed from time to time to come to Dharani's room either to make the bed properly or at times to blow the handfan on warm nights. She would often change the shirt Dharani was wearing because it had got wet with sweat or would offer him some water to drink if he needed. Although she slept in the other room, a slight cough or sneezing by Dharani would be sufficient to wake her up and make her move on to his room.

After she had helped Dharani to take parched rice with milk, Tagar came near the bedstead, which was now the only piece of furniture left of what Tagar had brought from her home. The chairs were all gone for being frequently sent out for this or that function in the village. Some were damaged while taking out to the theatre hall during the Durga Puja festival. Tagar thought of this as she was coming near the bedstead. The flowery design on one side of the bedstead reminded her of many a sleepless night of her past life, the dream like sequence of imagined moments that lay engraved in her mind. She looked at it with entranced attention and tried to decipher their meaning. Heaving a sigh she changed the bed cloth: instead of the plain bed cloth, she placed the one with the golden border, embroidered

with a fine design on both sides. As soon as it was dusk, she helped Dharani to come there and lie down on the bed.

That night, Tagar finished her household chores a bit early. After serving dinner to her husband, she scrubbed the floor and cleaned the hearth. Tagar then came up to sleep, Kamali was fast asleep by then. On other days Tagar used to sleep with the same dress. Today, she put on the silk *riha* and *mehkela*; Tagar was indeed surprised at her own desire for this change. Her cheeks took on a reddish tinge which was visible even in the darkness. Blowing the fan two or three times in the direction of Kamali she entered her husband's room experiencing an unexpected thrill of delight. Tagar came to sleep there thinking that her husband would be awake. Worn down by fatigue due to physical exertion, Dharani fell asleep as soon as he laid down on the bed. Guessing that Dharani might not be awake by then Tagar closed the door a bit noisily so that her husband might come to know about her presence. She blew the fan close to Dharani's body, touching it once or twice expecting that he would awake up from sleep. She tried to straighten his legs and pulled the shawl with more than usual force. When there was no sign of Dharani waking up, she was looking towards the bottle of medicine kept on the table to ask: "Did you take the medicine today?"

Since the evening Tagar was feeling an uncontrollable urge to take possession of her husband. She thought passionately how best she would make up the loss of her husband's affection and proximity for such a long time. She came to sleep on his bed with a desire to hear his passionate words affirming his love for her. But Dharani lying in listless sleep reduced her deep yearning to a cruel joke. He was no more than a log : a sense of revulsion engulfed her being. Having suffered a crushing defeat of her inmost desire, she laid withdrawn and shrunk like a tortoise as she slept near Dharani's feet. Despite all her effort to control herself, it appeared that nothing could stop the tears that drenched her.

As soon as she fell into a spell of drowsiness, many incoherent and meaningless scenes floated before her eyes. She was inside the deep Borkola forest tracking a narrow path. She was walking all alone. The tall leafy trees surrounded her like so many demons; the dark creepers entwined one upon another formed a canopy above her head. The darkness was rendered more dreadful by the monotonous sound of the wind over a thick bamboo groove, she looked behind in fear. What is that hissing murmur over the dry bamboo groove ? Suddenly, there was something glistening in the darkness. A snake! It was a snake, a dark cobra lifting its hood and chasing her. She cried hoarsely for help but she could hardly open her mouth. Her throat was dry. She felt thirsty. She started to run out of desperation. She fell down as her clothes got entangled in bushes and creepers; she threw away her clothes and started running for dear life – all naked. She did not know in which direction she was moving. After a long time, she was sleeping near a dead tree reclining her head on a dead trunk; a young man was looking on intently, gazing at her all the time. Who is he? Tagar seemed to know him – but not exactly. Who? Kamalakanta? Suddenly, Dharani's feet touched her breast. She gathered her clothes pulling it upward and in her state of semi-consciousness she recited words of a prayer:

Dharani uttered an inaudible groan; Tagar took his feet away from her breast. In sleep, she touched Dharani's feet in deep devotion, and started praying...

*He is my friend, Krishna
In deepest trouble
Remember Him
In all action
He is the guide.*

Even in her sleep, Tagar touched Dharani's feet with her head with a feeling of devotion.

EIGHTEEN

Nam Kirtana was held thrice daily at the *Namghar* in the month of *Bhadra*. Women sang regularly in the morning and evening as the menfolk gathered to listen to the reading and recitation of the sacred books after the singing was over. There were *bhaonas* held during this period. But the old enthusiasm for these rituals seemed to be waning. The village had several *Namghars* instead of one earlier mainly due to caste divisions among the villagers. In Dharani's village, the Koches and Kalitas had old scores to settle : the Koches somehow felt neglected and oppressed and held the Kalitas responsible. These partisan feelings had often led to the parting of ways on the social plan and that was how the Koches came to have their separate *Namghar* in the village. As they were economically better off, the building soon saw a roof of corrugated iron sheets coming up, making it a kind of showpiece; the older *Namghar* of the Kalitas had become somewhat dilapidated. Rain particularly worked havoc because of its leaking roof.

The anniversary of the saint fell on the following day. Women were delayed on these days in the matter of returning home because the details of celebration were being worked out in consultation with them as well as others. On that day Tagar hurried home from the *Namghar* neatly wrapping up her share of

the edibles which formed part of the offering in worship: She asked Kamali to carry the packet. Dharani was sitting on an armchair in the verandah waiting in expectation and when he saw Kamali, he asked:

"Today you are late. Did you drop in somewhere on the way?"

"The *tithi* is day after tomorrow. The discussion took so much time. That's how we got delayed," replied Tagar, who took offerings from Kamali's hand and gave some to Dharani. Dharani wanted to give the banana to Kamali but Tagar stopped him. "No, do not give her. She already had her share. The banana is quite tasty. Please take it."

Kamali came forward a few steps and was about to receive it. But she retreated on seeing her mother's stern look. Dharani too did not dare to give it to Kamali. Dharani took up a morsel; the remaining was taken by Tagar as she entered the kitchen. As soon as Tagar left, Dharani called his daughter and gave her a piece of banana almost pushing it into her mouth. But Kamali would not take it now and closed her mouth with her hand.

"Quick, swallow it! If your mother sees, she will be angry," Dharani said.

Kamali who first thought of not taking it for her vanity was picked, swallowed it quickly. Dharani asked what was the hymn they sang in the *Namghar* today. Touching the handle of the armchair with her fingers Kamali replied, "No, I don't remember."

Keeping his hand on her shoulder and reassuring her, Dharani told her, "Sing, whatever you can remember now."

She waited a bit and then said:

"I do not remember the one on Lord Jagannath."

"What is the one you can recall ?"

"About Rama crossing the ocean."

"Yes. Yes. Sing that one."

Kamali sang:

*Oh, Lord, please ferry me across
the ocean of worldly craving...*

She sang two or three lines in tune, and then asked, "Should I sing that one, *Madhava, my friend...*?"

"Please sing that hymn," Dharani said.

Oh! Madhava, my friend

Oh! Save me

*I cannot bear suffering
staying in this world.*

This refrain which Dharani had heard day in and day out acquired a new significance and he looked at the wide open sky to know what it was.

The star shining on the western horizon winked its eyes as if to tell the evening's tale to Dharani. Kamali clapped and lifted her hands towards the sky eager to know what her father was looking up there so intently.

"That one, that one," she shouted.

Dharani taken by surprise asked, "What?"

Kamali with her right hand pointed to the north.

"One should not walk when there is a single star in the sky. Let me see one more." Looking around, she discovered another star at a distance and sang tunefully – an ancient lullaby.

Oh! Sister Moon, give me a star

I don't want one but give me two.

She stopped a while and asked her father.

"Father, tell me what is the next line."

"I'll tell you and you also sing with me," Dharani spoke with the simple faith of a child.

Oh! Sister Moon, give a needle.

Why do you need a needle?

To stitch a bag.

What for?

To keep my coins.

Why do you need the coins?

To buy an elephant.

"No, we don't need elephant. Father, we shall have horses."

Dharani, unmindful of what the girl said, went on:

Why do you need an elephant?

To ride on.

Kamali put her hand on her father's lips saying, "No, No, You need not sing. Let me sing."

The yellow bird pecks the paddy stalk

The merchant's son takes the boat

The boat says tul-bul, tul-bul

The oar says go-go

Beat, beat the drum

Let the evening come.

Kamali again clapped her hands, she said, "See, see, many stars now – one, two, three – that one is shining so brightly."

"That one? That's the Pole star."

Kamali touched her father's chin lovingly and asked, "What is the Pole star, father?"

Dharani slowly and haltingly narrated the story of Dhruba.

The king Utthanpada had two wives, one was named Surusi, the other, Suniti. Uttam is the son of Surusi, Dhruba of Suniti. Dhruba was not allowed to sit on the throne. Dhruba went to the forest for meditation. God appeared before him.

"How do people meditate, father?"

"They go to a lonely place, fast and pray."

"Will God appear if one offers prayer to Him."

"Why not? Whoever is devoted to Him and offers a single-minded prayer will be able to see Him."

"If I call Him, will He ?"

"If you pray whole heartedly, it is quite possible. He loves children more."

Hearing what her father said, Kamali's cheerful face became grave for a moment. She looked at the cluster of stars above and the Pole star on the horizon and prayed for the invisible Lord in silence.

NINETEEN

"Kamali, do come and take some rice," Tagar called her daughter laying the meal before her husband. Kamali complained of stomach ache, she has not been taking anything since morning. She told her mother that she would not take anything now.

"No, I won't take," she said.

"Come near your father, just take a bit."

Kamali made no move to come. "There is a special dish today. At least take that if not the rice."

That preparation was a particular favourite of Kamali. She would not normally resist the temptation, her mother knew it well.

"No. No. I won't," Kamali was quite adamant.

"Let her not take if she does not want to," Dharani said.

Pouring some gravy on Dharani's plate Tagar said "she did not take anything yesterday complaining of illness and slept very early. She is getting thinner and thinner. On top it she has now this habit of fasting".

"Give her a little more of milk. You need not give me that much."

"There is sufficient milk. Why should you not take it ?"

Dharani was resting after he had finished taking his meal. Her work in the kitchen over, Tagar was about to go to the Namghar to hear the recitation from the holy book and Kamali was to be left behind. She told Kamali, stay indoors, don't roam about in the sun."

Kamali was waiting for this opportunity since morning. Dhruba prayed to God inside the deep forest in order to relieve his mother of sorrow. Father has said, if one prays, fasts and prays sincerely in a lonely place, God will appear. But where is the lonely place? After thinking for several days together, she remembered that there was a lonely groove on the bank of the river Kolong, an abandoned place that once belonged to a man called Chikon Bairagi. Kamali had been there two or three times earlier. The place was abandoned because of the erosion caused by the river. There was a huge tree there and an old stone icon which nobody worshipped. But a mendicant from the north came there once. In times of epidemic or other calamities in the village, villagers would light an earthen lamp besides it even now. Kamali walked all along the river embankment; it was the height of summer; the river was brimming to the full. Although not far from a place of human habitation, the forest grove had an eerie look. On the top layer, there were the evergreen trees with their roof richly decorated by verdant creepers. The thick foliage was so much entwined by the creepers one upon the other that it gave the impression of a giant coiling serpent. The undergrowth was thin but there were shrubs and bushes and the inside was so lonesome that not to speak of goats or cattle, human beings did not find it at all congenial. Kamali had this eerie feeling as soon as she entered. But as she went further inside, this feeling disappeared and there was a cool breeze blowing across removing the eerie silence. Kamali came near the tree without any sense of fear. The icon was there still. Someone had spread

vermillion all over it so that it hardly had the natural colour; Kamali sat before it kneeling down reciting the lines of prayer that her mother had taught her. It was accompanied by a passionate, incoherent cry: "Oh! god. Don't give more pain and suffering to my ailing father. Please make him recover quickly. We are very poor. Please help us, Oh! God." Her forehead touching the ground, she continued, "My mother is always crying because father is so sick. I touch your, feet and pray to you – let my father be cured by the injections given by the doctor." She continued to pray: "Others' houses have so many children. But I have no brother, nor any sister. We are three only. Why don't you cure my father ?" Her eyes became wet with tears as she pleaded and slowly the tears rolled down her eyes. She had not eaten anything for two days. When she was tired of crying, she fell asleep.

"Oh! god. Who is she," shouted Pavoi who came there in search of a medicinal creeper as soon as she saw the girl. "She is Dharani's daughter," she said recognizing her. "Perhaps her mother for some reason wanted to beat her and the poor girl had come to this place out of fear," Pavoi thought within herself. She spoke aloud, "Get up, get up dear, why did you come to this grove alone ?" She took Kamali by her hand and took her out of the wood.

Rubbing her eyes, Kamali thought her prayer had been answered and her dear father must have been cured by that time.

CHAPTER - IV

What should I tell
myself of sorrow?

*Whom should I tell
My tale of sorrow ?*

*Only my soul knows
What it is !*

ONE

Men were on their way to the cremation ground. They were singing a dirge as they carried someone who had departed for Baikuntha, the abode of God.

*The water of sorrow rises in a wave
The friend of life has departed
They cried in sorrow
Oh! My husband, Oh! My son
The friend of life has departed
Beating their breasts in sorrow
They clasp the son or the brother
A deeply resounding cry, all over
The friend of life has departed.*

A small girl was accompanying the pall bearers in front with a bundle of bamboo sticks lit up as a torch for performing the last ritual of the dead in the cremation ground. The plaintive note of the funeral dirge wafted along by the breeze had become more unbearable than the heart-rending cries heard in close proximity. When the cortege disappeared from sight, Bhusan came up to the front of his house and asked the group of villagers who were following it: "Who is being taken?"

"It is Dharani master."

The men kept moving as they replied. Bhusan did not look at them but murmured, "We did not know that he was dying. We heard that the doctor's medicine had brought about improvement."

A few of the neighbours gathered seeing Bhusan there.

"The man died quite young."

"For the one dead and gone it is perhaps all right. Real misery is for those who are left behind."

"How can the woman, now alone, manage the family?"

"He was in a way a rash and inconsiderate person. Where was so much necessity for him to sell his land?"

"He had no income for last two years. He was in jail and became sick. What can he do?"

"God has kept some provision even for the grasshopper. They will not starve. No, Dharani's wife is quite a capable woman."

These villagers kept on musing about the future that was in store for Dharani's wife for sometime standing there.

Tagar had neither any time nor leisure to lament her husband's loss. She would not shed tears when the last rites were being performed believing that it would not be good for the soul of the dead. Once the rites were over she had to devote herself entirely to the task of earning her livelihood, even though she was not in a mood to do so. The struggle was so intense that it rendered even mourning for a near and dear one an idle pastime.

A weaving society had been formed at Roha mainly on the initiative of the doctor. On his advice Tagar joined it as a member. A few former colleagues of Dharani who were in the weaving occupation also joined. Some of them used to bring cotton: others collected donations from the public. Others helped to sell the finished product in the Roha weekly market. Cotton fabrics woven

in the centre were of good quality; it was sent out as far as the Abhoy Ashram in Calcutta and other khadi centres scattered all over. Tagar had some consolation in taking up the work for which Dharani had devoted his life at one time.

A new Sub-Deputy Collector had joined recently on transfer from upper Assam. He had joined as Circle Officer of the Roha revenue circle, a sympathetic person, quite enthusiastic too as far as the work of the Sangha was concerned. As soon as they broached the topic he agreed to become a member of the organization. His wife was very interested in weaving. He suggested that his wife should be made the secretary of the Sangha. Trying to set up a loom in their house, the SDC's wife had sent for Tagar seeking to take her help. Tagar would be coming to her in the afternoon. Tagar was waiting for Kamali to come back from school; she would bring her along.

Kamali arriving from school threw her writing slate and the books on the table and asked for her four annas to buy pictures sold in school by Golapi. There were so many water colour pictures; red, green, king, queen and animals! She would not get those pictures unless she bought them tomorrow. Kamali told her mother:

"You will forget it tomorrow. Give me today. I shall not get it lost," Kamali kept on pleading.

"Not one or two but four paisa at a time! One anna could buy a seer of salt, half a seer of kerosene, a piece of good design for the towel in the loom. Where do we have so much to spare," Tagar pulled her daughter's hand away and said, "Go now, I have no money for pictures. You have your meal and get ready. I have to go to the house of the officer."

Kamali did not dare complain but sat down sulking inside to eat her meal, which was kept covered on the plate. The same vegetable dish and a piece of gourd too! She ate quite contentedly

in the morning. But now tears came to her eyes seeing the same food. She had asked her mother to cook masur dal so many times. It's sweet taste and colour came to her mind now. Her mother was getting more and more miserly these days, she thought. She could hardly spare a paisa for spending! The morsel she was taking into her mouth fell off and as she tried to put it back on the plate, Kamali whined, "No, I shall not go to school from today."

"What happened? You are getting more and more unreasonable with every passing day. Do you want to eat up your mother's head," Tagar shouted from the courtyard.

Kamali was thinking of those colourful pictures from the time she was in school that day. She was thinking what she would buy— which picture to put in what book and so on. The admonition from her mother made everything vanish from her mind. Thinking of her mother's cruelty, she began to cry. She wished she could throw her food on the floor. But she had no courage to do so. She thought of some unforeseen thing happening that would teach her mother a good lesson. Something came to her mind all of a sudden. She said with a lot of hesitation, "In school they always tease me saying that I am Golap doctor's daughter. How can I be his daughter?" Kamali apparently did not understand the import of what they said, but she obscurely felt that somewhere the fault lay with her mother.

Tagar stood speechless like someone struck by lightning. Should she have to spend her entire life bearing always this kind of slander and insult? Was it destined that utter falsehood in her case would always go on shining like the bright undiminished aura of truth?

"I shall not send you to school from tomorrow. You will study at home."

Kamali never wanted that she should be stopped from going to school. Why did she say? What did she say? It had the opposite result. The gravity of her mother's appearance indicated clearly that she would not be going to school from the following day:

Quietly washing herself, Kamali came near her mother to go to the residence of the SDC.

Tagar entered the residence of the officer quietly through the backyard. The wife was making afternoon tea for the children. The door of the kitchen was wide open. There was a sweet smell of something fried in the kitchen. Kamali looked inside. The officer's wife saw someone stopping at the backyard: her eyes caught Kamali's greedy look as the girl stood near the kitchen. She gave direction to the cook, closed the door and came out.

When the lady saw Tagar, she could recognize her instantly. She spoke cheerfully to her and made her sit down on a stool on the verandah. She herself sat down on a cane chair.

The cook brought the betel tray and a small knife to make the small pieces for them.

Women could get into familiar terms in quick time. They could become fast friends in a day. The lady and Tagar did not know each other but they got on very well, so much so that they soon talked like persons who have known each other for a very long time.

"Of course, since our coming here, we have not had much trouble really about our needs. Milk and fish are quite cheap. I have few friends' company to get over the loneliness. That's why I have got the loom ready."

"Are you weaving a *mekhela*?"

"I have never woven a *mekhela* for myself. I shall weave some shirt piece."

"For your husband?" Tagar smiled meaningfully. "No, Not for him. It is for my elder brother. They always joke about my not knowing to weave at all. I shall show them this time. But you will guide me. You will help me in setting the yarn."

"Please let me know when the loom is ready."

"No one to send from here. Please do keep coming. I have no companion really speaking."

"I would love to come here certainly if needed."

Tagar wanted to say something more but did not. Before she could finish, the lady said, "You do not want to come lest it affects the Sangha's work, isn't it," she looked at Tagar for support.

"What do you say, Aideo? What's Sangha's work? It is only the looms. In fact you will yourself not like it if I come everyday."

The lady mildly protested, "Please do not think that we are like the Bhuyans who were here before us. They did not like to mix, wherever they went they quarrelled. We are not like them. We are here for a few days and therefore why not have a friendly relationship with all?"

"Yes. Yes in the village, they have liked and appreciated your husband. We also want you for the Sangha work."

"What is the work I can do for the Sangha?"

"Our weavers have discussed already. They want you as their president."

"Who is the president now?"

"The doctor is the president now. But we don't want him to continue." Tagar came to this conclusion only at that moment.

Tagar stopped talking as she heard footsteps near the adjacent room. She saw through the door connecting the verandah

a gentleman in trousers and coat; he must be the officer, she thought. Shifting the veil on her head sideways, she saw him more distinctly now. It struck her mind as if she had seen him before somewhere. The face, the eyes and the height all appeared to be the same. Her eyes became instantly keyed up, happily bemused by a sense of wonder. The very next moment she turned blue like a person bitten by a venomous snake. Finding a woman sitting on the verandah, the officer did not come there; he coughed to clear his throat and entered the bedroom. Finding that her husband had come from office, Suprova rose from her seat and went inside.

Suprova came out after sometime and said, "Bai, wait a little. Please sit down." But looking at Tagar's face she was dumfounded. She asked, "What happened? Are you feeling dizzy or what? Was the betel not too strong?"

Tagar looked up with vacant eyes, like one in a trance.

"I have been feeling so dizzy," she said.

Suprova offered her a glass of water. Tapping her head and pouring some water there Tagar came out by the back door. A few closed pages of her life had unfolded again, making everything topsy-turvy. She recalled the passing moments going through the crucible of memories of the past.

TWO

The doctor was getting ready to go to the hospital. But his trousers were hardly in good shape: the old button holes were now too wide to fit him properly, his dressing up took time. The doctor was surprised to see Kamali so early on and asked, "What brings you here so early, Kamali ? Who has done your hair, let me see. Your mother must have done like this." Tightening up his trousers finally, the doctor asked, "What have you got in your hand ?" Kamali out of shyness kept the bundle concealed behind her. "Let me see," the doctor said while giving her a tight embrace and taking the bundle from her. As he opened the bundle, some *bej* fruits fell down on the ground. The doctor picked up one and smelt its fragrance.

Kamali smiled while looking towards the doctor.

"Did you keep one for yourself," the doctor said playing with one of the fruits on his hand.

"No, we don't take it." Kamali was about to leave.

"Hear Kamali, the teacher told me yesterday that you have stopped going to school ?"

Kamali was about to cry, she stopped at the door.

"Why ? Why are you not going ? Did I not tell you that I would take you to the town if you stood first in class this year."

"My mother does not allow," Kamali said and started crying again.

"Why ? Why is your mother not allowing you to go to school ? Are you also doing work in the loom ?"

"No," she replied.

"Go then. I shall ask your mother today the reason why you are not attending school ?"

"Oh, you wanted a box to keep pencil. Take this one." He took out an empty syringe box and gave it to Kamali.

Tagar had finished cleaning the backyard and was about to continue sweeping the front; in the meantime the cows had been taken out of the cowshed and tethered. She heard the strident voice of Mandal's wife charging and accusing with fingers pointing in her direction. The woman used to take opium, habitually getting up late and it was not unusual for her to find an excuse to badger one of the neighbours with her sharp abusive tongue; sometimes her own children could be at the receiving end if it was not anyone else. Tagar ignored her abuse thinking that she must have been indulging in her old habit. But once she saw Tagar, Mandal's wife became quite ferocious. Tagar raising her head saw her standing on the boundary of her land shouting and abusing, her words directly addressed to Tagar.

"You will die very soon. None can stop! Oh! What a girl! A real robber! She cannot sleep at night greedy for fruits of my garden. She came at midnight to pick those – a thief, if there was one! She has no fear for anything. You are taking poison, I say." She continued in this abusive vein. Tagar felt so utterly humiliated that tears rolled down her cheeks. She called out to Kamali while throwing away the broomstick in her hands but there was no sign of Kamali. She got up from bed along with her mother, where could she be going so early ? Yes, last night she spoke of taking those fruits to the doctor, certain it is, she has

gone to the doctor. What is the need for her to be so close to him?

Kamali was running in waving the small napkin in her hand as if it was a kite, causing a whistling sound in her movement. When she saw her mother in an unusually fierce mood, she stopped in front of the gate; she trembled like a leaf in spring torn by the passing west wind. She could see her mother's eyes almost red-hot from anger but she could not dare to look at them. Tagar caught hold of her hair in a flash, dragged her to the courtyard beating her with kicks and blows mercilessly. The box on her hand which was given by the doctor fell off on the ground.

"Will you ever go to others' orchards from now on?" She kept on asking repeatedly subjecting her daughter to a fresh round of blows and kicks every time. Her harshness went so much beyond limits that even Mandal's wife who continued abusing and shouting for sometime more at last interceded. "Leave it, she has had more than enough."

"No, there will be peace if she dies. I shall make her vomit blood. Her habit of picking up fruits from other's garden will then come to an end."

Mandal's wife left the place hurriedly seeing the fierce and uncontrollable display of temper on Tagar's part. Rupohi and Sonpahi who watched the proceedings from a distance entered their house quietly.

Kamali at first could not understand why her mother grabbed her hair and dragged her as if she had gone mad. Then the blows were struck one after another. Her throat became dry, she did not raise a shout. No tears rolled down her eyes. She did not try to get free from her mother's grasp or to run away. Like an innocent animal she kept on gazing at her mother. The look of her daughter shaken by fear suddenly caught Tagar's eyes. Her eyeballs were as if – they were Dharani's – bloodless, the face

too like his, utterly pale just as it was at the time of his death. Tagar's grip almost instantly loosened, releasing her daughter. Tagar could not control herself anymore. She rushed to her bed, weeping. Her cry was accompanied by inarticulate words but she was heard saying intermittently, "Oh God! Finish us off! Let both of us die right now. How long will you keep us alive to bear this endless suffering? Kill us, oh! God!"

She drew Kamali to her breast and both of them spent a restless night in bed without food or sleep. And their crying never stopped.

THREE

Afternoon, Kamalakanta, the Sub-Deputy Collector had just reached home from his office. He was quietly sipping his tea. Wife, Suprova was doing embroidery on a table cloth sitting nearby. He appeared a bit worried. He had sent a note to the Collector suggesting that the grazing reserve under Kasomari mauza should be dereserved for the settlement of immigrants from East Bengal. The villagers no longer grazed their cattle there; since land was not yet opened up for settlement, the government had suffered loss of land revenue. Normally any proposal for raising land revenue used to earn praise from the higher authorities. The Sub-Deputy Collector had also kept a list of probable settlers ready so that they could be allotted land as soon as the proposal was cleared. But quite surprisingly. Mr. Bevin, the Collector had returned the file. Not only that, he had chided the SDC for his thoughtless recommendation. What was worse the Collector had taken him to task for his recommending despite his being an Assamese officer the allotment of land to the immigrants near an old tribal village, a village which was inhabited by the Lalung tribe. The Collector thought that it would lead to a perpetual conflict in the future. The SDC had also been cautioned and asked not to recommend such precipitate steps in future.

Taking his tea and snacks, Kamalakanta was going into the pros and cons of the entire issue. Where was the secret of so much concern for the Assamese people on the part of the deputy commissioner, an Englishman ? It must be the work of some of the informers who were always active. He had information that an advocate in the town was making enquiries from Robin Kanungo, one of the staff of the office and it was quite possible that some advocates were responsible for prejudicing the mind of the Collector against the proposal. These advocates always go against a good constructive proposal. Many of them had very little work; they used to move about trying to find somebody they could cause harm. They did not earn much – some of them even asked the clients to buy cigarettes for them – but yet they were the leaders of public opinion. They would not hesitate to undo all the policies of the government. The other day he was deposing in the case relating to Rajat Mauzadar and he was humiliated by the defence advocate while subjecting him to cross-examination. The Council should enact laws to stop this kind of legal practice. But then even in the Council the majority of the members were from the bar. Kamalakanta shrugged off his disappointment and taking a sip of the tea he looked towards his wife and asked : "Can I have more tea ?" Suprova, looking up from her embroidery work called the cook, "Baputi, bring another cup of tea." Suprova now asked, "Well, what's the matter today. You have a sullen look." She lowered her head to put the needle thread to the hole of the needle and continued, "Did you finish some Mandal's career today or what ?"

Kamalakanta believed that his wife in her heart of hearts hated the job of a Sub-Deputy Collector. That was why he would not normally talk about official matters before his wife. On occasions when such subjects came up, her response was one of sarcasm rather than sympathy. Trying to divert his wife's

attention since he did not like to answer a question asked with so much disdain, Kamalakanta said, "What is it you are embroidering ?"

"A table cloth for brother," she replied. As the cook kept the tea on the table, she directed Baputi to keep the kettle on. "Keep my snacks on the mid-safe. I shall take it after bath. Please go out and look for the children. Pomila has taken them out. She is so careless at times." Pomila's real name was Fesi but such a rustic name would not do in an officer's house and her renaming which was not at all liked by her was done by Suprova. Given the choice, Fesi would give up the job but her father had taken money in advance.

"You have sent the children out so early," Kamalakanta remarked. He liked to enjoy their company on his return from office but this was not quite acceptable as far as his wife was concerned. Suprova did not like to bring up children by nursing them herself; it was better left to the maid servant, she thought. That was the way her children had grown up. She replied to her husband in a tone of protest, "Do you want to keep them indoors the whole day for me to look after them all the time? I asked for a perambulator for the girl but there was no money. I would have liked a small cycle for Anupona last month but you have deferred the purchase to the coming month. Many months will pass on like this." Suprova keeping the embroidery frame down looked up to her husband in seeming disgust.

Kamalakanta reclining on the chair now replied a bit indifferently, "You have seen how the troubles have multiplied one after another. The other day your two gold rings and cash were stolen. If I pay the insurance premium, it will be difficult to pull on this month."

"If my father had married me to you thinking only of the money that you earn, I would have been a pauper like Parvati,

Siva's consort long time back. Do you remember having given any decent gift to the children ?"

Showing a detached attitude like what was enjoined in the *Gita*, Kamalakanta said, "It is good that the children do not get anything just for the asking. This would not have been good for their future."

"If you want to have heavy insurance cover fearing the future or keep a good portion of the salary in provident fund, you will starve, no doubt, both the future and present will be jeopardized as a result."

"I am not speaking of starving. I am speaking of checking all wasteful expenditure."

"Wasteful expenditure is a bad thing for the poor but for the rich, there is pleasure in this indulgence. One who knows the joy of living also knows the pleasure of wasteful spending. The poor are neither capable of enjoying nor of sacrifice." Her reasoning was borrowed from something the poet Tagore had said.

"However much you make fun of poverty, it is poverty that is real education or helps a man to grow. Why don't you think of Buddha, Ashoka and Mahatma – they all voluntarily embraced poverty."

"Why did you end up with Mahatma Gandhi? Let me mention some more – Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal, C.R. Das, Tarun Phukan, Bordoloi, Kamalakanta, the sub-deputy collector."

Kamalakanta cast a piteous glance towards his wife and asked, "Are you making fun of me ?" "How can I not do it ? Those whom you have mentioned never grew up in poverty. They had the silver spoon in their mouth. You are talking of education ? None of them passed B.A. from Cotton College. They all studied abroad."

Kamalakanta, his right hand on the table was listening to his wife's words without demur. He was not keen to get into an argument with Suprova nor did he have the guts to do so. If he said anything to rebut her strongly, she would sulk, refuse to take food for two days and it would then be his turn to plead with her, and the entire scene enacted before the servants would erode his prestige or affect his standing before his subordinates.

Whenever Suprova got angry, it reminded Kamalakanta of an incident that took place a year after their marriage. Kamalakanta was posted as Circle Officer, Janji. One of Suprova's cousins was getting married at Jorhat. Suprova told her husband on the previous day to arrange a car. Kamalakanta spoke to a taxi owner from Jorhat and arranged the car. On the day, Suprova dressed up in her best finery was waiting for the car to come and take her. From 10 A.M. to 1 P.M. she waited and waited but there was no sign of the car coming. Kamalakanta sent a messenger to Jorhat on cycle. Whatever be the charge, he should bring a taxi, he told. Kamalakanta also wrote to a friend of his who had a personal car.

It was not easy to arrange a car on hire at Jorhat. The car arranged by Kamalakanta had gone out of order and was in the garage. Most other taxis were already booked. Kamalakanta's friend did not have a driver on that day and would not like his car to be driven by anybody except the regular driver. The messenger, a subordinate working under Kamalakanta returned at night to tell that he could not arrange a car. On hearing this Suprova fell into fit of uncontrollable rage blaming Kamalakanta for his inefficiency, and as she became more abusive, her anger instead of subsiding by letting off steam became all the more inflamed. She tore apart the gold necklace she had on her neck and the Benaras silk shawl into pieces: she trampled upon the table cloth after kicking at the table breaking a flower vase in the process.

She was hysterical. She pulled at her hair and cried inconsolably. None could dare to go near her till she got tired and fell asleep. Kamalakanta thought that her anger made her more terrible than a dreaded snake.

A shiver went down his spine as Kamalakanta recalled this scene. To change the tone of the conversation, Kamalakanta interjected, "Ashoka the Great, the favourite of the gods did not probably go abroad. This is at least borne out by the stone inscriptions of the time."

History was Suprova's favourite subject. She often argued her husband that history as a subject was superior to Philosophy. Thinking that Kamalakanta's reply contained some hint or reference to this, Suprova brushed his argument aside, almost playfully, saying, "Oh, leave it. You are again bringing up the old thing ignoring the present."

Kamalakanta heaved a sigh of relief thinking that a crisis had blown over. Picking up her embroidery frame Suprova was about to leave and asked, "Has the yarn arrived? Shall I not get my yarn till the money is recovered?"

"I have told Chadmal babu today. Yarn in stock is not of good quality. He is bringing yarn from the town tomorrow or the day after. Did Dharani master's wife come looking for yarn?"

"Why not? Did she not come day before yesterday?" She continued, "Your Baputi has even seen her opening the box kept in the office room," Suprova smiled dismissing the very idea.

"This – Baputi is downright stupid."

"She has not taken any offence, I think. Baputi it seemed told her something against her fiddling with the box."

"What a scoundrel! Who asked him to say? It is as if he has become the sole owner of the place."

"In her conversation, none will take her to be a rustic woman. She hailed from upper Assam – our side really. The

husband who was posted that side had actually eloped with her, she is also educated," Suprova said.

"Call, call Baputi. Let me give him a slap," Kamalakanta said raising himself from the chair.

"Leave it, no need to beat up a Brahmin boy at this hour of twilight. This could be inauspicious." Giving a sharp look in the direction of her husband, Suprova continued, "What's the matter? At the very mention of the young wife of Dharani master you seem to get provoked."

Kamalakanta, deeply embarrassed, sat down on the chair. The intemperate nature of his wife had denied him peace in this life. With all her frustration, Suprova had not only made herself unhappy she had made her husband's life miserable too.

It had become more agonizing every day of his life to live together with his wife.

"Sir, are you at home," Someone called outside. Kamalakanta heaved a sigh and came out to the verandah in front. Meanwhile, his wife had gone inside the bathroom with her favourite Cuticura soap.

FOUR

"Oh, It's Inspector! Please come – please take your seat," Kamalakanta offered the Inspector a chair and sat down on another chair near him. He was actually the sub-inspector Madhab Mahanta of Roha police station.

Kamalakanta, the circle officer, smiled and asked, "What is the news? Anything definite?"

"Should I come to you unless I have got it, sir?"

"Since the job is given to you now, everything is bound to come out," Kamalakanta said. "Tell me where," he asked and looked eagerly towards Mahanta.

"No. You need not have to go far. It is very close by."

"Very close by?" Kamalakanta's surprise was evident on his face and his eyes. "I have just searched the house of the wife of Dharani Master, the secretary of the weaver's Sangha. We have recovered one and rest assured that the remaining one will be recovered soon. Did you lose anything apart from money and those gold rings? Several pairs of silk and muga fabrics have been found in her possession."

"No, no, no clothes were stolen from our house."

"It may not be yours, but it may belong to someone else."

"Why, it may belong to her."

"What do you say, sir ? She does not have two square meals to eat. How can she afford to have such beautifully embroidered garments ?"

"I am not at all convinced that the theft has been committed by her. Your suspicion does not seem to be correct."

"We would not have come to you on mere suspicion. Sir, she has been caught red-handed. The object has been sent to office for entering in the register. It will be brought to you from there for your identification. I shall not say anything. If you see the object, you will yourself know."

Madhab Mahanta shuffled his feet, looked towards the roadside and waited.

"Master's wife came to your house to meet your wife several times. She has been where your clothes are kept. On the day of occurrence, your cook has seen her touching the office box."

"You are mistaken. No money was stolen from the office."

Shaking his head, Madhab Mahanta said, "I know that. This incident has a sure connection with what happened at night, she did not steal herself but helped other thieves to do so."

"Helped the thieves? Who are the thieves ?"

"How do I name all of them in one breath? First, the inference, then proof, and finally the name."

Visualizing the complete success of his investigation, the officer tried to remove doubts from the Sub-Deputy Collector's mind and said, "The thieves have been caught on suspicion, they are the volunteers of the weaving Sangha."

Kamalakanta's face took on the colour of ash like the dark side of a lamp. "Mr. Mahanta, we are not able to do anything for

the country's sake. Those who are doing their bit should not be faced with harassment," he said

"Forget about working for the country. Have we not done anything good for the country? You always think that the police exists only to oppress the people. If we were not there could you have lived on so safe and secure for so long. You are shocked by my suspicion. Please wait and see – the Sangha gang has just started it and in a few years they will be taking recourse to train robbery. I have been observing the behaviour of the sangha volunteers for quite sometime. I shall round up the whole lot one day and have cases registered and ensure that they are sentenced to minimum four-year rigorous imprisonment."

"Oh! What are you saying? The Sangha has helped the poor women weavers in the village to earn a little. Do you want to end it once for all," saying this Kamalakanta turned his face in disgust.

"I do not like to say how the weavers are earning money. But it has opened up the scope for the volunteers in every village to flirt with the young women."

"You seem to see only the dark side of things."

"The better side of man is always there to be seen like the exhibits in a show room. Everyone sees them. But the dark side is covered, hedged in from without. You need special eyes to see it, you need intelligence and also hard work. We, police and C.I.D. do this very thing."

Madhab Mahanta apparently had reason in what he said. Kamalakanta smiled and said, "You have used a very expressive language as they do in a work of literature."

Mahanta knew that Kamalakanta had no respect for police. He was determined to show that he was not like other police officers, he was not unfamiliar with the higher things of life as

well and by no means Kamalakanta could hope to trifl with him. Prompted by Kamalakanta's encouraging words, he continued, "You are talking about my using a literary language? I was elected joint secretary of the socio-literary club when I was in the first year in college; my poem on the lofty theme of the motherland was on everyone's lips those days. But then what did I achieve? Father expired when I was in the first year; I had to leave and join the service. My literary pursuits were nipped in the bud. I want to write. But where is the time? But still there is a consolation: They also serve who only stand and wait."

"Oh! Your stolen objects are just being brought here. See..." he said seeing a constable on the road.

"There is no need for identification. Still the owner should see and remove his doubt. Many things will come out from the recovery of the stolen ring." Madhab Mahanta suppressed his smile.

"What is the mystery you have unraveled over the rings and the cash worth forty rupees ?"

"Do you know, sir? You get such a variety of experience in police. Take it as certain, wherever there is a woman, there is a mystery. Even simple things become quite complex. That gentleman will be finished now along with Dharani master's wife."

"What do you mean," Kamalakanta looked towards Mahanta in utter bewilderment.

"If the name of the doctor figures in the case, don't be surprised."

"What do you say? The doctor?"

"He has nothing to say in defence, caught red-handed. Golap doctor is the president of the weaver's Sangha, she is the secretary. One is a widower, the other one is a widow. People say the doctor killed him administering the injection."

"What a pity! You seem to believe the gossip of the village. Do not believe these stories. Please don't drag the doctor into these matters."

"You are a magistrate and you have a high degree of the university. You can find meaning in things recorded in books. But the dark recesses of the human mind hidden by the external covering escape your notice. How can you – innocent as you are – understand this side of the human character. Sir, let me tell you even gods fail to fathom human nature."

Man is really a mysterious creature in God's creation. Earth, Water, Air – he moves everywhere freely. His conduct is out of the ordinary. It is not easy to know the inside or even the outside is seen to be as simple as a freshly cut bamboo knob. Lies, deception, falsehood add up so much that the real identify is submerged. Like a sudden flash of lightning making a portion of the darkness transparent, the proof adduced by Madhab Mahanta unraveled the dark side of the doctor's character before Kamalakanta's eyes. He has heard a lot of things, good and bad about the doctor since his coming to Roha. He ignored everything thinking it to be malicious gossip. But today he understood the meaning of those words of slander uttered against the doctor and this mind and body shrank back in revulsion. Oh! What a dreadfully depraved human being! How inconceivably bad! He has killed Dharani master and is having a liaison with his wife! What an irreligious, immoral man! The very air of the village has been polluted. When Kamalakanta thought about all this, his breathing seemed to stop.

The constable was coming in with a bundle in his hand. As he approached the stairs he saluted the sub-inspector coming a few steps forward and handed over the parcel to him. Madhab Mahanta stretched his hand and showed the box and the embossed name of the doctor on top and gave it to Kamalakanta

for his examination. Kamalakanta took it with lot of hesitation due to an overpowering sense of revulsion, one normally felt for a filthy object when touched.

Whatever doubt he had about the wicked character of the doctor vanished as soon as he saw the syringe box with the name of the doctor engraved upon it. Thinking of their illicit and obscene relationship, he did not like to open the box even.

Madhab Mahanta had already got down to the business of preparing a highly sensational case, which would rope in the doctor, Dharani master's wife and the volunteers of the Sangha. A political case definitely, but also a mixed one with a liaison and an illicit relationship over lapping the offence of theft. Not to speak of the vernacular dailies, the Calcutta press would pick up the details and publish it with bold headlines. There would be congratulations – a handshake from the IG, words of praise from the magistracy and applause from the legal community. A promotion to C.I.D. would be the obvious outcome.

Mahanta was a bit apprehensive as Kamalakanta did not like to open the box. The doctor had become quite friendly with him over last several months. He was sympathetic to Dharani's wife also. Suppose he decided not to allow the inspector to proceed with this case. If he failed to recognize the wife's ring and thus failed to identify it or denied his ownership !

"Sir, please go inside and show the ring to it's real owner; our good luck in recovering it will bring sweets for us from her." Madhab Mahanta literally lifted Kamalakanta from his chair clinching his request thus half in jest. Despite his obvious reluctance, Kamalakanta was forced to take the ring inside.

Suprova was not yet out of the bathroom. Coming out from it was the pleasing fragrance of Cuticura soap, and then the sweet humming of a Tagore song was wafted along in the air.

*You are staying in my heart like a deep wound
Only my mind knows how the mind feels.
Holding you in my heart, day and night*

*My eyes keep gazing upon your face,
Hope, Thirst, Love and everything
Happiness and Sorrow for you
Takes on the same hue.*

*Whatever has been destined has happened
It is now gone, and gone for ever
And the rest
Death takes over.*

The sad resonance of the song filled the evening sky. Kamalakanta heard it for a moment in deep silence. Then he opened the box carefully and took out the ring. But when did he have this ring made? It had his own name embossed on it. The design too was very old. Kamalakanta stunned by the discovery could see nothing more and everything before his eyes became hazy. The ring that symbolized the blessing of a golden youth had after a hundred buffettings of misfortune, suffering and humiliation come back in the form of a curse. The box and the ring slipped from his hand and as the ring fell off on the floor and rolled on, Kamalakanta's head too rolled with a strange sickness. His dazed consciousness made him sit down unsteadily on the arm of the chair. His face now had a death – like pallor like that of a corpse placed on the dissection table. In his estranged mind and vision, an endless stream of memories came rushing and started a frenzied dance.

GLOSSARY

Aaideo	:	Form of addressing a respectable lady
Aaita	:	Grandmother
Adhiar	:	Tenant or sharecropper
Aghon	:	Eight month of Assamese calendar (Nov.-Dec.)
Ahat	:	A banyan tree
Ahin	:	Sixth month of Assamese calendar (Sept.-Oct.)
Bakul	:	An evergreen tree with sweet scented flowers
Bez	:	A man practicing indigenous, often occult medicine
Bhadra	:	Fifth month (Aug.-Sept.)
Bihu	:	Traditional festival of Assam.
Bohag Bihu	:	Traditional spring festival of Assam
Bohag	:	First month of the Assamese calendar (Apr.-May.)
Bormoina	:	Common form of addressing the eldest son
Chador	:	Traditional Assamese wear; a sheet covering the upper portion of body
Gamocha	:	Hand-woven piece of cloth with a decorative design; a towel
Khandua	:	Rented for a short term.

Kirtana

: *Kritana Ghosha*, authored by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, the greatest Vaishnavite saint of Assam

Mauza

: A revenue circle comprising several villages

Mauzadar

: The revenue officer designated by the Govt.

Mekhela

: One piece traditional Assamese women's wear from waist to toe

Mandal

: A revenue official

Muga

: Silk yarn made out of rearing silk worm in Assam

Naam

: Devotional singing

Naamghar

: A prayer hall in the village

Shri Madhavdeva

: Shri Sankardeva's disciple and his close associate; also a saint poet in his own right

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF ASSAM SAHITYA SABHA

Asam Sahitya Sabha, the most important literary organization of Assam, was constituted for the development of Assamese language, literature and culture. Another important objective was to work for enriching the indigenous languages of the state. The Sabha has achieved the distinction as a pioneering literary organization in the country.

During the last part of 19th century, Assamese students and youths staying in Kolkata formed two literary organisations for the development of Assamese language and literature. These are: 'Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha' and 'Assamese Literary Society'. But the necessity for a state-wide body was greatly felt by all the conscious Assamese sections. The idea of a common platform to work for the development of Assamese language, literature and culture was conceived by Ambikagiri Raychoudhury, a poet, writer and veteran Freedom Fighter. The idea was endorsed by Lakshminath Bezbarua. The efforts of a number of Assamese writers and organizations, like, the Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha, led to the formation of the Asam Sahitya Sabha on December 26 and 27, 1917, at the historical town of Sivsagar to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the people of Assam irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Representatives from all parts of Assam and Kolkata attended the meeting with great enthusiasm. Padmanath Gohain Barua and Sarat Chandra Goswami became the first president and the first secretary respectively. Nilamoni Phukan, Indreswar Barthakur, Debeswar Chaliha, Kirtinath Sarma Bardoloi, Satyanath

Bora, Chandranath Sarma, Ambikagiri Raychoudhury, Ratnakanta Barkakati, Mahadev Sarma, Amrit Bhusan Adhikari and Lakshminath Bezbarua were some of the notable members of the executive committee.

The head office of the Sabha is located at the Chandra Kanta Handique Bhawan in Jorhat. The Bhagawati Prasad Barua Bhawan in Guwahati and Rangsina Bhawan at Diphu are other two important centres of the Sabha. The two centres of the Sabha are at Dibrugarh and Dhuburi — the eastern and the western boundary of the State. The Sabha's strength lies in more than 1,000 branches scattered all over the State. The formation of affiliated branches in the neighbouring states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland has added strength to the functioning of the Sabha.

The Asam Sahitya Sabha was constituted with an aim to develop and enrich the Assamese language and literature, and to bring all the indigenous languages under one umbrella. The other objectives are to publish dictionaries in Assamese and in other indigenous languages, to publish books on folklore of Assam, to bring in proper development in the field of art, culture, sculpture, etc. The activities of the Sabha include research in different areas of literature, language and culture, and publication of a research journal. The young writers are awarded by the Sabha for their creative pursuits. The Sabha organizes seminar, workshop, conference, drama camp, etc. to encourage young writers. A significant step of the Sabha is to form the State-level body to coordinate the activities of various organizations working for the indigenous languages.

A notable achievement of the Sabha is that it has published more than 10,000 books since its formation. It played a laudable role in the publication of the Assamese dictionary

Chandrakanta Abhidhan. The organization has coordinated efforts to translate several important English and Sanskrit books in to Assamese. The Sabha has already published nine volumes of the World Encyclopedia in Assamese.

Besides its literary engagements, the Sabha has not remained indifferent to the socio-political issues faced by the state. The Sabha has played active roles at difficult times of Assam.

SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROJECTS

1. Asam Sahitya Sabha has already published 10 volumes of World Encyclopedia in Assamese language. Each of the volumes is over 800 pages. The published volumes are of the content: Vol. 1, 2 & 3 : Science; Vol. 4 Indian Literature; Vol. 5 World Literature and Folk Literature; Vol. 6 & 7 History; Vol. 8 & 9 Society and Culture; Vol. 10 Philosophy.; Vol. 11, 12 and 13 Health and Medical Science. Two more volumes on the subject 'Nature, Environment and Wildlife' and 'Agriculture' are presently being compiled and edited. It may be mentioned here that Hon'ble Chief Minister, Assam, has sanctioned a special financial grant of Rs 50 lakh for this Encyclopedia in Assamese Language project.

2. Asam Sahitya Sabha has formed an institution of oriental studies with the name, 'Asam Tattwa Gaveshana Sangsthan'. This institution is designed as a centre of excellence to offer Ph D and M Phil Degrees to the research scholars.

3. Asam Sahitya Sabha has formed a research centre at Agartala with financial and logistic support from the Govt of Tripura. The name of this research centre is Brahmaputra-Gomti Cultural Literary Research Centre.

4. Assam Sahitya Sabha has already proposed to form three more research centre in the line and style of the one in Agartala. The first one is at Itanagar (Arunachal Pradesh): 'Lummer Dai North-East Centre for Language, Literature and Cultural Research', the second one is at Kolkata (West Bengal): 'Jonaki Centre for Language, Literature and Cultural Research' and the third one is at Bhubaneswar. The Chief Ministers of West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh have already assured us of positive response. We shall submit the formal proposal to the Chief Minister, Govt. of Odisha, regarding the proposed research centre at Bhubaneshwar, within a shortwhile.

5. Assam Cultural University at Guwahati is one of the recent and most ambitious projects taken up by Assam Sahitya Sabha to generate extensive study and research on the cultural traits of various community and nationality of India and South East Asia. The Assam State Government has allotted a plot of land of 50 bighas at the outskirts of the city of Guwahati and the construction work will begin soon.

6. At present, Assam Sahitya Sabha is working on several encyclopedia, such as, 'Encyclopedia of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev' (for which the Sabha has earned a financial support of Rs 10 lakh from Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd), 'Encyclopedia of the Writers of Assam', 'Encyclopedia of Tea & Tea Communities of Assam', etc.



along the high road

The development of the regional novel and its multi-dimensional connection with social history can be seen in the difference between *Miri Jiyari* (1894) and *Jivanar Batat* (1944). It is significant that about half-a-century separates these two major novels in Assamese literature. *Jivanar Batat* received belated recognition as a novel of crucial historical or cultural significance in more recent times. It is yet to be translated into a major Indian or foreign language though it has come to be regarded as a classic; a great Indian novel of the twentieth century. Its author Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-1964) wrote this novel under the assumed name of Bina Barua. Besides being an outstanding novelist he was a historian of Assamese culture and an eminent folklorist who did some important pioneering work on both ancient and the folk streams of Assam's history. It is not surprising that his most significant novel has often been regarded as being truly authentic representative of Assamese life and culture.

This particular view of the representative character of *Jivanar Batat*, recorded a year after the novel was first published, has since been elaborated on by other important critics while evaluating the Assamese tradition of novel writing. It is not only because of the intervening period but also for other preoccupations of the novelist that this novel is very different from *Miri Jiyari* or any other subsequent novel both in terms of its thematic depth and narrative expansiveness. Despite its strong regional overtones with the evocative presentation of local ambience and idiom, the novel has a Hardy-like engagement with historical and social realities in the context of an agrarian society deeply attached to the traditional mores of religion.

Significantly, the main character in the novel is Tagar, a woman of purer intent and deeper sensitivity than any other person in the novel. Yet the character is not idealized and from the very beginning it represents the strong socio-religious context of the novel set in the heart of the Assamese countryside. The texts weaves a rich tapestry of rural life, with tradition, culture and ecology interwoven into it, interpenetrated at times by the deeper layers of religiosity derived from the influences of neo-Vaisnavism in the social ethos of an organic community. All these combine to provide the backdrop of a human drama working out through the linear flow of the narrative.

The significance of the novel in terms of certain specificities of life or culture or habitat genuinely reflective of an Assamese identity can be seen in bold relief if the novel is compared to the other outstanding novels of Indian tradition like Bankim Chandra's *Visavriksha* (1873), Tagore's *Gora* (1910), Sarat Chandra's *Pather Daabi* (1926) and Bibhutibhusan's *Pather Panchali* (1929).



Born on October 8, 1908, Birinchi Kumar Barua joined Presidency College, Kolkata, after passing his Matriculation Examination and had a brilliant academic career, securing first class in Pali and Prakrit from the University of Calcutta in 1934. He joined the same University as a research scholar under D. R. Bhandarkar, Carmichael Professor of Ancient Indian History and Culture. He was also beginning to make his own contribution in the creative field. His short stories written under a pseudonym Bina Barua made a distinct contribution to the growth and development of short story in Assamese literature. He also wrote *Jivanar Batat* (1944) again under the same name and proved himself to be a highly accomplished novelist, setting the benchmark for others to follow in the field of creative fiction in Assamese.

In 1945, Birinchi Kumar Barua left for London to work for his Ph. D. degree at the School of African and Oriental Studies, London. He was awarded the Ph. D. degree of London University in 1947. After his return from England, Dr. Barua rejoined Cotton College but after the founding of the Gauhati University on 1st January, 1948, he joined the university. Throughout his career in the university, Dr. Barua excelled as a teacher and a researcher. He earned distinction as a scholar-historian, critic and a pioneer in the field of folklore studies. Some of the major works of Dr. Barua are:

The Cultural History of Assam (1951), *History of Assamese Literature* (Sahitya Akademi, 1964), *Assamiya Bhasa Aru Sanskriti* (1960), *Modern Assamese Literature* (1957), *Sankardeva, Vaisnava Saint of Assam* (1960) and *Asomor Loka Sanskriti* (1961)

Besides, Dr Barua edited quite a few old and modern Assamese texts and wrote extensively on Pali and Buddhist literature. He was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award posthumously.

He joined the Indiana University, USA, as a Visiting Professor (1961-63) while working on his two volumes of World Folklore. Earlier, his second novel *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1959) gave a deep insight to his mastery over the craft of creative fiction.

Birinchi Kumar Barua passed away on March 30, 1964.